



*Freesia leichtlinii* growing at the Bredasdorp airfield in the Overberg in the southern Cape.

# FREESIAS: *potted & wild*

Except for one species, freesias are endemic to South Africa. These flowering plants were hybridised in the 19th century to produce a wide variety of versatile garden plants.

**L**OVED BY FLORISTS AND gardeners alike, freesias are one of our well-known floral gems. Most of us are familiar with the popular freesia hybrids offered as spring bulbs by nurseries and which make such a wonderful show in our gardens.

What many of us don't know is that all these many-coloured hybrids are the result of the crossing and selecting of wild species. This was done as early as the 19th century by English and Dutch horticulturists, using material sent regularly from South Africa by the many plant collectors who explored our countryside in the early years.

The genus *Freesia* is included in the family Iridaceae, a family of iris-like plants, mostly with underground corms and sword-shaped leaves with parallel veins. They are

deciduous, with clear-cut growth, flowering and dormancy cycles. The genus was named after a German physician and plant lover, FHT Freese from Kriel in Germany. Except for one species, which extends into central Africa, freesias are endemic to

*'They make excellent garden and rockery subjects.'*

South Africa. There are no fewer than 16 wild species of freesia. Most of these are found in the winter rainfall region of the Western Cape, but there are a few that occur in the summer rainfall regions.

Freesias mostly have trumpet-shaped flowers arranged in an arching spike on wiry stems. Many are highly scented to attract

pollinators. Most are found in clay soils such as in the Renosterveld of the Western Cape, but one spring flowering species, the tall *Freesia corymbosa*, extends as far as Fort Beaufort in the Eastern Cape where it grows in rocky sandstone outcrops and can be seen flowering in September on road cuttings between Fort Brown and Fort Beaufort. It's also common on road verges of the N9 near the Eastern Cape border, between Uniondale and Willowmore.

Species such as *Freesia alba* from Hermanus and *Freesia caryophyllacea*, which I have observed near Napier, flower in early spring and have the strongest scent. These two are interesting in that they have leaves which lie almost flat on the ground, much like extended fingers. The two summer rainfall species flower



Two colour forms of *Freesia laxa*, a forest species from the Eastern Cape, which does well in shady gardens.





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- Freesias are deciduous, with a clear-cut growth, flowering and dormancy cycle.
  - The corms survive out of the ground during dormancy and are easy to store.
  - There are no less than 16 wild species.

*Freesia grandiflora* is a very beautiful summer rainfall species, which occurs in rocky outcrops in the Magaliesburg.

later in spring and prefer more wooded areas and forest glades. *Freesia grandiflora* flowers from January to March and occurs in the Magaliesburg area on wooded rocky koppies. *Freesia laxa* flowers in October and November and is confined to semi-shaded areas and forest margins from the Eastern Cape to as far north as east Africa and Sudan. It has a number of colour forms and both red and white variants are found in southern populations and an earlier-flowering, blue variant occurs further north.

The summer rainfall species were previously classified as *Anomatheca*, but due to their strong similarities they have now been included in the genus *Freesia*. Freesias are easy to cultivate from seed, some flowering within 10 months of sowing. They make excellent garden

and rockery subjects, do well in pots and make excellent cut flowers. The corms multiply freely underground and can easily be propagated by lifting and dividing the corms each season. The corms survive out of the ground during dormancy and are easy to store, market and distribute. Corms of wild species and seed are available from registered wildflower nurseries.

For more information on wild freesias and many other bulbs, *The Color Encyclopedia of Cape Bulbs* by John Manning, Peter Goldblatt and Dee Snijman, published by Timber Press (2002), is an excellent reference.

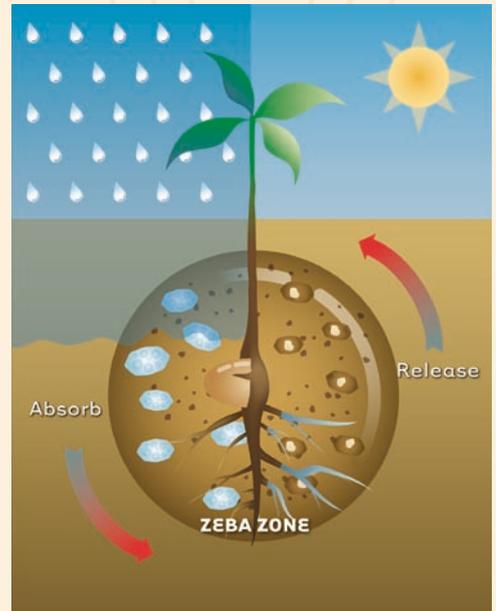
A revision of the genus *Freesias* by Manning and Goldblatt, with colour plates by Auriol Batten, is currently being prepared for publication. – Cameron McMaster ([cameron@haznet.co.za](mailto:cameron@haznet.co.za)) |fw

*Freesia speciosa* occurs on stony Karoo flats from Montagu to Calitzdorp.



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