

Ledebourias – the summer rainfall hyacinths

Often overlooked, these attractive plants' spotted appearance is increasingly drawing attention to them as garden subjects, but their true uses are not forgotten, writes **Cameron McMaster**.

LEDEBOURIAS ARE AN IMPORTANT component of the grassland biodiversity in the summer rainfall region. Recognised by their spotted leaves and hyacinth-like flowers, ledebourias are closely related to the lachenalias we discussed last week.

They are, however, rather plain and drab compared to the many beautiful species of *Lachenalia*. Both are classified in the family Hyacinthaceae. Whereas lachenalias have a winter growth pattern and are found primarily in the winter rainfall region, ledebourias are largely restricted to areas of the summer rainfall region.

Originally thought to be closely related to the genus *Scilla*, they are sometimes referred to as the African squill, "squill" being the common name for the true scillas of the northern hemisphere. However they differ from the *Scilla* by their spotted leaves and other taxonomic features. Because they superficially resemble European hyacinths, I prefer to refer to them as the summer rainfall hyacinths.

The genus *Ledebouria* was named after Dr Carl F van Ledebour (1785-1851), a

German professor of botany. The annotated checklist *Plants of Southern Africa*, published by the National Botanical Institute in 2003, lists 21 species in SA, with only two confined to the winter rainfall region and three overlapping the winter and summer rainfall region, and the rest confined to the summer rainfall region. However, the genus is widespread and represented in sub-Saharan Africa, India and Madagascar.

The unpublished revision written in 1993 by S Venter is the most recent, but it's not easy to use, especially when the bulbs aren't in flower, and there is an urgent need for further work on the genus and an updated revision. In 2002 Andrew Hankey published the *Vegetative Key to the Genus Ledebouria (Hyacinthaceae) in South Africa in Plantlife No. 27: 16-1*, which is more helpful in identification of the individual species.

A colourful contribution

The *Ledebouria* are small bulbous plants, usually with spotted leaves and flower spikes, from 10cm to 20cm tall. Their many flowers are arranged on a floppy to upright spike and mostly appear in early spring.

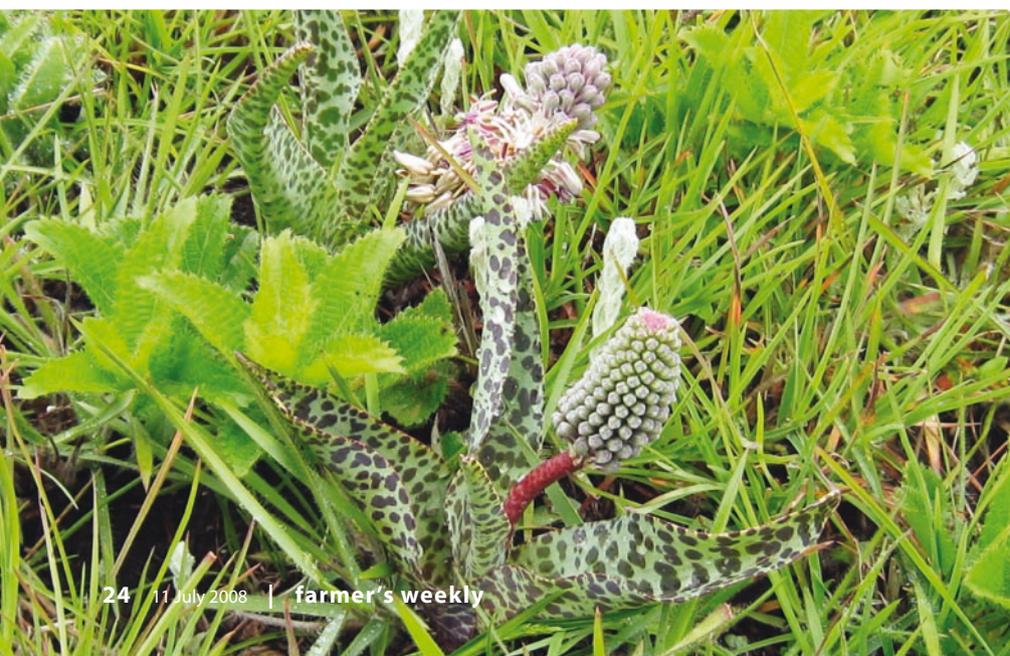
The individual flowers are not large or showy, but when examined closely they are exquisite, variously coloured mauve, purple and pink and green, and sometimes almost luminous. They are fairly common and widespread, occurring on all types of grassland and thicket, often among rocks. They go dormant in the dry winters,

'Bulbs are used to treat skin irritations and wounds.'

and can tolerate a degree or two of frost. The seeds of most of the summer rainfall species are usually ripe by early summer and ready to germinate immediately. Some species propagate by bulb offsets.

In her *Field Guide to Wild Flowers of KwaZulu-Natal*, Elsa Pooley records that the tough leaves of *Ledebouria revoluta* are used to make twine for mats and the bulbs are traditionally used to treat skin irritations, wounds, lumbago and gall sickness in cattle. There are records of the bulbs forming part of the diet of the indigenous people of the Kalahari. Because of the beauty of their spotted foliage, there is an increasing interest in ledebourias as decorative pot plants and garden rockery subjects.

Ledebourias are very often overlooked, but their attractive spotted foliage arranged in a neat rosette is often eye-catching and it's most rewarding to examine the exquisite tiny flowers. *Ledebouria floribundus* is the most attractive species with heavily spotted leaves and a large flower head. There are, however, some very small species that rival it in beauty when examined closely. – *Cameron McMaster (cameron@haznet.co.za) |fw*



Ledebourias are an important component of grassland biodiversity in the summer rainfall region, and are recognised by their spotted leaves and hyacinth-like flowers.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

- *Ledebouria floribundus*, as the name implies, has a large spike of hundreds of flowers. It's the most striking of all the species in the genus.
- This close up of *Ledebouria hypoxioides* found near Grahamstown illustrates the beauty of the tiny individual flowers.
- The attractive spotted leaves of many *Ledebouria* species, arranged in a neat rosette, are often what first attracts attention to these interesting plants.
- This diminutive pink flowered *Ledebouria* occurs in the Amathola Mountains. It multiplies rapidly by forming offsets and is a most attractive and rewarding pot plant.
- *Ledebouria revoluta* photographed near Toise in the Cathcart district.



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- Although almost unnoticeable, ledebourias are fairly common especially in grasslands.
- The flowers are arranged on a floppy to upright spike.
- The genus is widespread and represented in sub-Saharan Africa, India and Madagascar.

