

# ROMULEA: *hidden secrets*

What Romuleas lack in size they more than make up for in the exquisite beauty of their flowers, writes **Cameron McMaster**.



- This genus was accidentally introduced to Australia where it is a pasture weed.
- More species occur in the winter rainfall region.
- The genus is indigenous to Italy and was named after Romulus, the mythical founder of Rome.



TOP AND LEFT: *Romulea komsbergensis* (right), as the name implies, was described from specimens on the Komsberg Pass near Sutherland. They prefer wetlands where they bloom *en masse* (left).

“FULL MANY A FLOWER is born to blush unseen” – Thomas Gray could have been referring to

*Romuleas* when he wrote those words.

*Romuleas*, which belong to the Iridaceae family, are a large and widely distributed genus, but small and sometimes obscure. Many occur in out-of-the-way arid and mountainous areas. Most species are not encountered every day and are less than familiar to all but the most avid wildflower enthusiasts.

What they lack in size they more than make up for in the exquisite beauty of their

crocus-like flowers, occurring in many hues and colour combinations and sometimes in massed displays after good seasonal rain.

*Romuleas* have always fascinated me and I catch my breath in awe every time I come across even the less spectacular members of this fascinating group.

They are small, deciduous perennial bulbous plants with one to several thin, sometimes grass-like leaves. The leaves are grooved with margins that are either thickened or winged. Also known as *froetang* or *knikkertjies*, the seed capsules are edible and in earlier times were sought after by farm children. In the book

*Rondebosch Common*, published by the Friends of the Rondebosch Common, with illustrations by Betty Dwight, the latter writes “*Froetang* – when a child I ate many!”

### A range of flowers

The often striking flowers, relatively large for such small plants, are cup or bell-shaped and borne on short stems, usually not more than 10cm long and sometimes close to the ground, with the flowers situated between the leaves.

The colours vary from white through yellow, orange, pink, blue and mauve shades to bright red, often yellow in the



*Romulea setifolia* photographed near Tulbagh in the Western Cape has a range extending into the western parts of the Eastern Cape.



*Romulea monadelpha*, one of the most beautiful in the genus, occurs in isolated populations in areas of the Roggeveld escarpment near Middelpos.



*Romulea macowanii* is a summer rainfall species from the Eastern Cape. This specimen was photographed in gravel beds at the top of Naude's Nek Pass between Maclear and Rhodes.

*Romulea unifolia*, from the Calvinia and Roggeveld region of the Northern Cape, has only one leaf, as the name implies.



*Romulea tortuosa*, photographed on the farm Rooiwal near Middelpos, has spirally twisted leaves and occurs from the Kamiesberg southwards through the western Karoo to the Hex River pass.



*Romulea subfistulosa*, one of the many spectacular species form the Roggeveld escarpment in the Northern Cape.



cup and with darker markings. Some of the flowers have a satin-like sheen and produce copious amounts of yellow pollen.

The genus, which consists of about 95 species, is centred in the winter rainfall region where 64 species occur. They are found through Africa to the Middle East and the Mediterranean basin. The genus is represented in Italy and is named after Romulus, the mythical founder of Rome.

In the Western and Northern Cape most species are found in the drier, semi-arid regions of the Bokkeveld, Hantam and Roggeveld. Here they flower mostly in spring and contribute to the massed floral displays as far as Namaqualand.

#### Climatic distribution

It's always a challenge to look out for the less numerous *Romulea* flowers among daisies. They are best seen on sunny days when they open wide and turn their flowers to face the sun. Particular species like the yellow *Romulea diversiformis* and the pink *Romulea komsbergensis* are adapted and confined to seepage areas where they flower *en masse* after good rain.

Some species occur in the more southern parts, extending eastwards into the Karoo and along the south coast to Port Elizabeth and beyond. There are a number of species from the summer rainfall region in both low- and high-altitude grassland, and while some species adhere

to early spring flowering, most flower in mid-summer to autumn in that region.

*Romuleas* are much less numerous in the summer rainfall region and it's quite a challenge to find the short plants with grass-like leaves in the thick grass sward where they often occur.

### 'At least five species occur in the Renosterveld fragments.'

*Romulea rosea* is probably the commonest and most widespread species throughout the Western and southern Cape. It's very variable and has a number of different forms. It was introduced into Australia long ago, probably in fodder taken on at the Cape for animals being shipped there from Europe, where it's become a major pasture weed. There it's known as Guildford Grass, having been first noticed at Guildford near Perth. While it can totally dominate older perennial pastures there, with its host of natural predators at the Cape, there's no danger.

Having lived most of my life in the Eastern Cape, my first encounter with *Romulea* was on the Amathola mountains where two species occur – the yellow *Romulea macowanii* and *Romulea autumnalis* which flower from mid-summer into autumn.

I subsequently found both species on the Bosberg above Somerset East. The former extends into the Drakensberg and Lesotho

where it can be found growing in gravel beds on basalt slabs at high altitudes.

Another exciting find in sour grassland in the Cathcart district in August is *Romulea pratensis*. It's a less showy species flowering early when the weather is still wintery. It's an example of a summer rainfall species that has preserved a winter growth cycle.

A true wealth of *Romulea* species occur in the Western Cape. An outing in spring with the Indigenous Bulb Growers' Association to Middelpos and the Roggeveld escarpment, where some of the most spectacular species occur, was a real eye opener.

At least five species occur in the Renosterveld fragments in the Napier area where I live. On a trip over the Rooihooft Pass between Montagu and Touws River in August this year, we found another five species in flower in that dry Karoo habitat.

Personal encounters with *Romulea* illustrate how rewarding being observant while walking in the veld can be.

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The genus *Romulea* was last revised in 1983 by Miriam de Vos and published in *Flora of Southern Africa* Vol seven, Part two, a publication of the Botanical Research Institute. *The Colour Encyclopedia of Cape Bulbs* by Manning, Goldblatt and Snijman, published by Timber Press, is a further reference for the *Romulea* of the Western Cape.