



# Tritonias flowering splendour

The genus *Tritonia* includes a wide variety of flowering plants that occur in diverse habitats particularly in the Western Cape, writes **Cameron McMaster**.

IN THIS SERIES WE'VE DEALT PRIMARILY with families and sometimes individual species of wild flowers. We've also dwelt on some of the institutions involved in biodiversity conservation that can assist landowners with conservation farming.

This week we discuss *Tritonia*, another small but important genus of beautiful bulbous plants. Hybrids and cultivars of *Tritonia* have been developed by the horticultural industry and rank among the most popular spring bulbs available at garden centres around the world. As with many of our popular garden plants, the

commercial cultivars originate from wild species found in the South African veld.

I find the wild species infinitely more exciting than the showy hybrids that have been developed from them, and take great pleasure in looking out for wild populations whenever I'm in the veld. Those I mention here are all species I have personally encountered.

*'I find the wild species infinitely more exciting.'*

The genus *Tritonia* is part of the family Iridaceae and it's closely related to *Crocasmia*. However, they are generally smaller plants with sword-shaped upright leaves that often form a two-ranked fan. The flowers are generally funnel or trumpet shaped, sometimes with a long narrow tube. The name *Tritonia* is derived from the Latin *triton* meaning weathercock, referring to the variable direction of

the stamens of the different species.

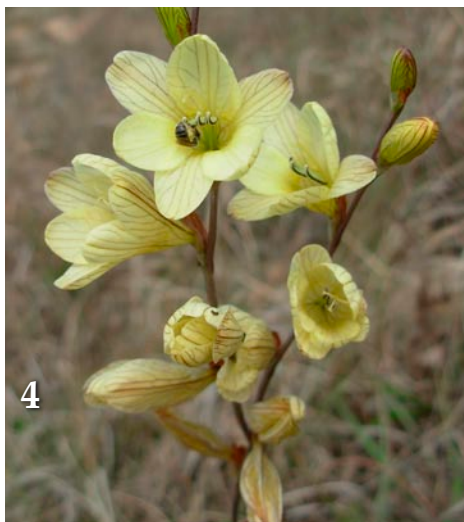
There are 28 species found from the Western Cape to central Africa, with the majority, eighteen, found in the Cape Floristic Region.

### Distribution and variety

Like many South African bulbous genera, *Tritonia* are found in both the winter and summer rainfall regions and growth and flowering patterns vary depending on where the species occur. For instance, *Tritonia laxifolia* and *Tritonia securigera*, two very similar species, have opposite flowering times. The former is an Eastern Cape species found in thicket vegetation and it flowers in Autumn, whereas *Tritonia securigera* extends from about Kroomie in the Eastern Cape westwards into the winter rainfall region, and it flowers in early spring.

*Tritonia lineata* is probably the most widespread and common and it occurs in grassland over most of the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. It flowers in spring and is usually a pale, maize colour with black

- Eighteen species occur in the Western Cape.
- *Tritonia* are related to *Crocasmia*, but are generally smaller.
- Hybrids and cultivars have been extensively developed by the horticultural industry.





striations on the petals. At its more westerly extremity in the Somerset East district, it has orange-coloured flowers. *Tritonia disticha* is a vigorous pink species found in extensive populations in damper areas and seeps in the Eastern Cape mountains in mid summer. A most attractive, similar but almost red species is found at high altitudes from Barkly East through to Lesotho and onto the Drakensberg. Not surprisingly it has been named *Tritonia drakensbergensis*.

#### Sights worth seeing

Anyone who has done the Geological Trail up the rocky hillside in the Walter Sisulu Botanical Garden near Johannesburg, in February, is sure to have seen a little red *Tritonia* that flowers in the grassland between the bushes there. It's *Tritonia nelsonii* and it's confined to the northern regions of South Africa. However, it's in the Western Cape that the most spectacular species are found, most of which flower from early to late spring. *Tritonia crocata*, *Tritonia squalida* and *Tritonia deusta* are three showy bright-red species that flower in late spring in the Overberg and have been used to develop the garden

cultivars we are so familiar with. Since most of this region has been transformed by agriculture, there aren't many wild populations of these three species. They are now confined to fragments of Renosterveld, too rocky to plough, or to road reserves.

An interesting species with flowers with exceptionally long tubes can be seen in mid summer on dry rocky outcrops in the Overberg. It's *Tritonia flabellifolia* which has a winter and spring growth pattern, and it flowers only after the leaves dry off in summer. *Tritonia bakeri* is found mostly in the Little Karoo and the Longkloof. I have seen it on the Potjiesberg Pass near Uniondale.

However, undoubtedly the most memorable sighting was when I observed *Tritonia karooica* near Middlepos on the Roggeveld plateau. It's a small and very distinct species with strongly re-curved leaves arranged in a fan shape. It flowers in early spring and the deep, yellow to orange flowers are large for such a small plant. *Tritonia* are certainly worth looking out for; they're so widespread they are sure to be flowering on your farm or in your area.

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1. *Tritonia crocata* from the southern Cape is one of the species from which the commercial *Tritonia* cultivars have been developed.

2. *Tritonia disticha* from the Amathola Mountains in the Eastern Cape.

3. *Tritonia bakeri* is found in the Little Karoo and the Longkloof.

4. *Tritonia lineata* is common in grassland in the summer rainfall region.

5. *Tritonia deusta* photographed on a roadside near Bredasdorp.

6. *Tritonia karooica*, one of the gems in the genus, occurs in arid areas in the Western Karoo. This spectacular specimen was photographed near Middlepos in late August.

7. *Tritonia drakensbergensis* occurs at high altitude in the North Eastern Cape, Lesotho and KwaZulu-Natal.

8. *Tritonia securigera* has a wide distribution in the Eastern and Western Cape from Oudtshoorn through to Adelaide.

9. *Tritonia flabellifolia* flowers in midsummer in rocky outcrops in Renosterveld after the leaves have died back.

*'They are sure to be flowering on your farm.'*

