



ABOVE AND RIGHT: *Nerine huttoniae* (left) is confined to the Fish River basin, where it occurs in deep alluvial soil which is increasingly being converted to irrigated agriculture. The picture on the right, taken near Cookhouse, depicts recently ploughed veld where thousands of these magnificent bulbs were destroyed. Changing land-use patterns in the area poses a severe threat to this and other rare and vulnerable plants.



Nerine lilies

– exquisite and rare

These bulbous plants, endemic to Southern Africa, are popular garden subjects around the world, writes **Cameron McMaster**.

MOST GARDENERS WILL BE familiar with nerines, exquisite bulbous plants with umbels of pink, white or red flowers with frilly petals. What is less known is that there are at least 25 species and that it's a genus endemic to Southern Africa, widespread in a variety of habitats throughout the country.

Nerines are deciduous or evergreen perennial bulbous plants classified within the family Amaryllidaceae. Most species are found in the summer rainfall region, but four are confined to the winter rainfall region. Flowering time for the different species varies from mid- to late-summer and autumn to as late as mid-winter.

The first species to come to the notice of European botanists was the magnificent scarlet Cape species *Nerine sarniensis*. The plant was described as early as 1635 as *Narcissus Japonica Rutilo Flore*, and known at that time from the Guernsey Island in the English Channel. However, the association with Japan in its name was the result of a mistaken impression that the bulbs had originated from a wrecked Japanese ship. While it's true the species did become

naturalised on the Guernsey Island, how it got there is a matter of speculation.

When Carl Linnaeus introduced the binomial classification system in 1753, he named this plant *Amaryllis sarniensis*, preserving the association with the Guernsey Island – Sarnia being the Roman name for Guernsey. It was only after Francis Masson, the intrepid plant collector from Kew Gardens, returned to England in 1775 with specimens of the plant from the Cape that its true origin become known. *Nerine sarniensis* is to this day still called the Guernsey Lily.

An interesting history

The genus *Nerine* was established in 1820 by the *Amaryllis* expert, Rev William Herbert, naming it for Nerine, the Greek mythological sea nymph. He named nine species at that time, all collected by Masson.

Nerine sarniensis occurs in rocky outcrops in fynbos in the Cape mountains. The strikingly beautiful red flowers have specks of gold from reflected sunlight, a feature they have in common with a few other red *Amaryllids*, such as *Brunsvigia marginata*

and *Cyrtanthus guthrieae*. It has found its way around the world and become naturalised in many countries with a similar climate to the Cape. I have seen extensive feral populations in Victoria, Australia and several hundred cultivars and hybrids have been named and registered in the UK and elsewhere, many of which produce excellent cut flowers and pot plants.

The most common species in the Western Cape is the pink *Nerine humilis*, found largely in the heavier clay soils of the Renosterveld where it flowers spectacularly in April and May, especially after fire. Nerines in the summer rainfall region are divided roughly into two groups – those with broader strap-like leaves and those with filiform or grass-like leaves. *Nerine filifolia* is the most well known of the latter. It occurs in isolated populations in shallow soil over rock slabs in the Eastern Cape. A similar but smaller species with more compact flower heads, *Nerine masoniorum* is threatened with extinction in the wild, where its habitat near

RIGHT: *Nerine bowdenii* is the largest and most popular species. It occurs naturally on rock ledges in the high Drakensberg. This picture was taken on the slopes of Sentinel Peak



- Nerines are deciduous or evergreen perennial bulbous plants.
- At least 25 species occur in the summer and winter rainfall regions.
- Nerine populations are threatened in the wild,

RIGHT: A white form of *Nerine gibsonii*, a rare and highly threatened species which occurs on communal grazing land near Cala in the Eastern Cape, where its habitat is being degraded by overstocking and erosion.

FAR RIGHT: The spectacular red *Nerine sarniensis*, the first to be described and the most beautiful of the *Nerine* species. It's found in rocky outcrops in mountain fynbos in the Western Cape.



Umtata is being destroyed by the expansion of villages. Fortunately it has been extensively cultivated. *Nerine filamentosa* is a small but very distinctive and localised species with grass-like leaves confined to the Cathcart district. It has tightly re-curved petals and long filaments, hence its name.

There are a number of species of uncertain status in Mpumalanga which may be threatened, for instance *Nerine platypetala*, confined to perennial marshes, and *Nerine rehmannii* in western

'There are a number of species of uncertain status.'

Mpumalanga whose habitat is being degraded by overgrazing and trampling by cattle. The status of *Nerine gracilis* and *Nerine transvaalensis*, both of which have thread-like leaves and occur in the drier northern parts of the country, is very uncertain.

Nerine angustifolia is a more robust species with very narrow leaves and large, attractive, crisp pink flowers which occurs in marshes and wetlands from the Amathole mountains in the East Cape, throughout the north-eastern Cape and southern KwaZulu-Natal and northwards to the

highveld of Mpumalanga. Confined to wetlands in a small highland area, between Lady Frere and Cala in the Eastern Cape, is the highly endangered *Nerine gibsonii*. It occurs in a rural tribal area and its habitat is being systematically destroyed. It's unique among nerines in that its colour ranges from white through shades of pink to dark pink. It's in urgent need of conservation.

Making an impression

In the group with broad strap-like leaves *Nerine bowdenii* is the most well-known in the high alpine regions of the Drakensberg. It's winter-hardy in the UK and New Zealand and very easy to grow and propagate. With large flowers borne on tall stems it has also been used extensively in breeding and selection programmes for the horticultural trade.

Nerine undulata is a medium-sized species with broad leaves. Being widespread it's adapted to forest verges and even dry thicket vegetation in the Eastern Cape. *Nerine krigei* is unique in that it has a strong spiral twist in the leaves. It occurs in vleis in the northern Free State and southern Mpumalanga and is the earliest species to flower – even as early as December. A further group of robust nerines with

broad leaves but large Brunsvigia-like flowers on short stems occurs in more arid regions and flowers in January.

Nerine laticoma occurs from the central Free State around Welkom northwards across the Vaal river. *Nerine huttoniae* is confined to the Fish River Valley and its tributaries in the Eastern Cape in deep alluvial soil, in large numbers. Since its habitat is so suitable for cultivation its status is currently very vulnerable.

Farmers in the Fish River basin who intend to develop irrigated land should be aware of requirements for thorough environmental assessments. In the case of these nerines and possibly other protected species like *Aloe variegata*, growing areas should be set aside to preserve them.

Most species of *Nerine* are easy to grow from seed and develop fairly rapidly into flowering-sized plants. Like most Amaryllidaceae they have fleshy seeds which germinate spontaneously soon after ripening. Most nerines also propagate easily from offsets which readily develop around the parent bulb. A popular guide to the species is *Grow Nerines* by Graham Duncan, one of the Kirstenbosch gardening series.

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A mass display of *Nerine humilis* flowering after a burn on the farm Fairfield, in the Napier district of the Overberg in the Western Cape.