

Detail of the African potato (*Hypoxis hemerocallidea*) flower.

PHOTOS: CAMERON McMASTER

# African potato

## – a disappearing traditional remedy

### *Hypoxis hemerocallidea*: The African potato (Inongwe in Xhosa)

THIS WELL-KNOWN AND controversial plant bears no relationship to the potato we eat. It is traditionally one of the most widely used medicinal plants, recommended by our minister of health as a cure or palliative for HIV/Aids.

The African potato was common until recently in the grassland of the eastern summer rainfall region. It is a member of the family *Hypoxidaceae* and is one of the larger species in the genus *Hypoxis*. It is a tuberous, deciduous perennial with broad,

slightly hairy leaves arranged in three distinct groups spreading outwards from the centre. The bright yellow star-like flowers are borne throughout the summer on long stalks.

#### Healing powers

The African potato is harvested and traded for medicinal purposes. A concoction made from the bulb is taken orally to treat high blood pressure, and applied as a paste to treat acne. However, the plant is reputed to cure a host of other ailments.

Tony Dold and Michelle Cocks, a dedicated husband-and-wife team at Rhodes University, have made an extensive study of the use of wild plants for both medicinal and cultural purposes. They estimate approximately 80% of black South Africans use traditional medicines and there are over 100 000 traditional healers in the country, with a contingent industry worth approximately R500 million a year. More than 700 plant species are traded for medicinal purposes, and the intensive harvesting of wild material is a serious threat to biodiversity in the region.

Traditionally, healers harvested medicinal plants to treat their own patients and this was probably sustainable. However, it is now a commercial enterprise undertaken on a large scale. Dold and Cocks estimate 11 000kg of African potato is traded annually, selling for an average of R29,30/kg.

How does this affect the farmer and landowner? Excessive harvesting probably happens without the landowner's knowledge. In some cases traders enlist farmworkers to harvest the plants, the landowners only becoming aware of this practice after hundreds have been dug up. Ironically, a permit

from the Department of Nature Conservation is required, as well as the landowner's permission, before harvesting can take place, but in practice this legal requirement is never observed.

#### Cultivation can halt the decline

Because of the value of this plant in traditional medicine and the diminishing wild populations, there is a strong case for cultivation. However, this option is far too arduous and long-term for most people, as the plant can take eight to 10 years to produce a bulb of usable size. However, propagation is the only long-term solution for a sustainable supply. The African potato is extremely hardy and drought-resistant, and once established needs little maintenance. Seed can easily be harvested from wild plants and will germinate successfully if handled correctly. For best results, seeds should be kept cold for six to eight weeks (mixed with vermiculite in the refrigerator) before sowing in well-prepared seed boxes. In the wild, seeds are normally exposed to winter frosts before germinating the following spring. When plants are one to two years old they can be planted out into permanent beds. – Cameron McMaster (cameron@haznet.co.za) |fw



ABOVE LEFT: The unsustainable harvesting of the African potato, as depicted in this picture, will lead to its rapid decline in the wild.

LEFT: The African potato (*Hypoxis hemerocallidea*) – a medicinal plant very widely used by traditional healers.