

Wild garlic a lingering allure

Wild garlic belonging to the genus *Tulbaghia*, the only unequivocally African member of the large, worldwide family Alliaceae – the onion family – writes **Cameron McMaster**.



OUR WILD GARLIC BELONGS to the genus *Tulbaghia*, the only unequivocally African member of the large worldwide family Alliaceae, the onion family. The genus consists of at least 21 species in Southern Africa.

Except for one, our many different species of wild garlic are not all that well-known or often observed in the veld. This is because the small and rather insignificant flowers are often overlooked. The exception is *Tulbaghia violacea*, an internationally cultivated and extremely popular garden and landscape subject that's also an important medicinal plant.

Tulbaghia are small deciduous or evergreen perennials with several strap-like leaves and thick rhizomatous roots rather than bulbs. The general appearance of the plant and flowers is very onion-like. The more-or-less nodding flowers are

borne in umbels consisting of numerous small flowers, each with a central reddish or brown corona surrounded by small greenish to pink petals. In the popular cultivated species, *Tulbaghia violacea*, the corona is less accentuated and the large pink petals make an attractive display.

Seeds develop in top-shaped capsules which split open when ripe, releasing small wedge-shaped black seeds.

A common feature of all *Tulbaghia* is the strong, but not unpleasant, onion or garlic smell, which is very persistent and clings to the fingers and hands when the plant is handled. In fact, it's so persistent the smell has been recorded as still present in 200-year-old herbarium specimens. It's this

'The smell has been recorded in 200-year-old specimens.'

smell that has given *Tulbaghia* the popular name "wild garlic". The flowers also have a strong, sweet scent, especially in the evenings when it attracts moth pollinators.

The genus *Tulbaghia* was created by the Swedish botanist Linnaeus in 1771, based on plants sent to him from the Cape by governor Rijk van Tulbagh in 1769, after whom it was named. The first species to be described was *Tulbaghia capensis*, a common plant in the Western Cape, which flowers in early spring.

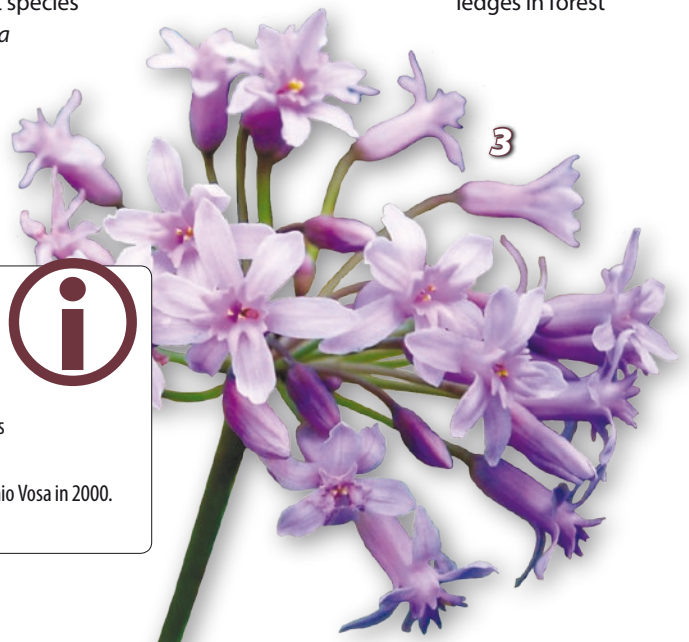
Since then other species have been recorded throughout

Southern Africa in a variety of habitats, mostly occurring in the eastern summer rainfall region. Two attractive mauve- to pink-flowered species have become horticulturally very important.

Tulbaghia violacea occurs naturally from Knysna to KwaZulu-Natal and there are a number of different forms. It's evergreen, extremely hardy, drought-resistant, disease-free and flowers profusely. It multiplies by continually making offsets that develop into huge clumps that thrive with minimum care.

This is an ideal plant for massed commercial planting and is used throughout the world for this purpose, and as a popular garden plant. A number of cultivars derived from it have been registered in the UK.

The other very decorative species is *Tulbaghia simmleri*, a large plant with broad strap-like leaves and attractive, highly scented flowers. It's endemic to a small area of the northern Drakensberg in Mpumalanga, where it occurs on rocky ledges in forest



- Wild garlic's most distinctive feature is its strong scent.
- All South African *Tulbaghia* species are prized as collectors' items.
- The genus was revised by Prof Canio Vosa in 2000.



5



6



7

patches. I've found it exciting to track down the many less well-known, but nevertheless very interesting species that occur widely throughout the grassland and mountain regions of the eastern half of the country.

For example, when stopping to admire a population of *Nerine filifolia* in a rocky outcrop near King Williams Town some years ago, I found a beautiful little *Tulbaghia* with small, pale mauve to white flowers. I took it to the Compton Herbarium for identification and coincidentally, met the person who had described and named it. This was Prof Canio Vosa from Pisa in Italy, who is the world authority on *Tulbaghia* and who revised the genus in 2000 when attached to Linacre College in Oxford.

This species was discovered by D Comins, the one-time curator of the Kaffrarian Museum in King Williams Town and named after him, *Tulbaghia cominsii*. The interesting thing about this plant is that it hasn't ever been found anywhere else, but only at this particular spot – a challenge for anyone to find other populations and extend its known range. Currently, Prof Vosa is

investigating another interesting *Tulbaghia* I found on the farm Kaboega in the northern foothills of the Zuurberg.

Wild garlics, particularly *Tulbaghia violacea* and *Tulbaghia simmleri*, are widely used as medicinal and cultural plants and also as food. They are said to be an effective remedy for fever and colds. The leaves are used to treat bowel cancer, and decoctions are used as enemas for stomach problems. Rural people in KwaZulu-Natal plant *Tulbaghia* around their huts to ward off snakes. The leaf is used to flavour meat and vegetable dishes, and the rhizome for the preparation of a "love potion".

I have heard that *Tulbaghia* plants will deter moles, but in my garden moles tend to relish them. All our *Tulbaghia* species are prized as collectors' items and garden plants in the UK, where there are registered National Collections and tended to by designated "keepers". Many hybrids and named cultivars are available in the nursery trade and are featured on shows, such as those organised by the Alpine Garden Society. As many of our wild plants, it seems they are more appreciated elsewhere than in our own country.

It will be well worth taking more interest in wild garlics and even growing them from seed, which is a very easy and effective way to propagate them. The genus *Tulbaghia* was revised by Prof Vosa in 2000 and published in the journal *Caryologia* Vol. 53, No 2.

– E-mail Cameron

McMaster at
cameron@haznet.
co.za. |fw

1. *Tulbaghia ludwigiana*, an East Cape grassveld species photographed on the farm Quagga Heights near Stutterheim.

2. *Tulbaghia capensis*, a common Western Cape species and the first wild garlic to be described in 1771.

3. *Tulbaghia simmleri*, a striking species from the northern Drakensberg in Mpumalanga.

4. *Tulbaghia cominsii*, a very small species known so far from only one locality near King Williams Town.

5. *Tulbaghia natalensis* which, as the name implies, is found in KwaZulu-Natal.

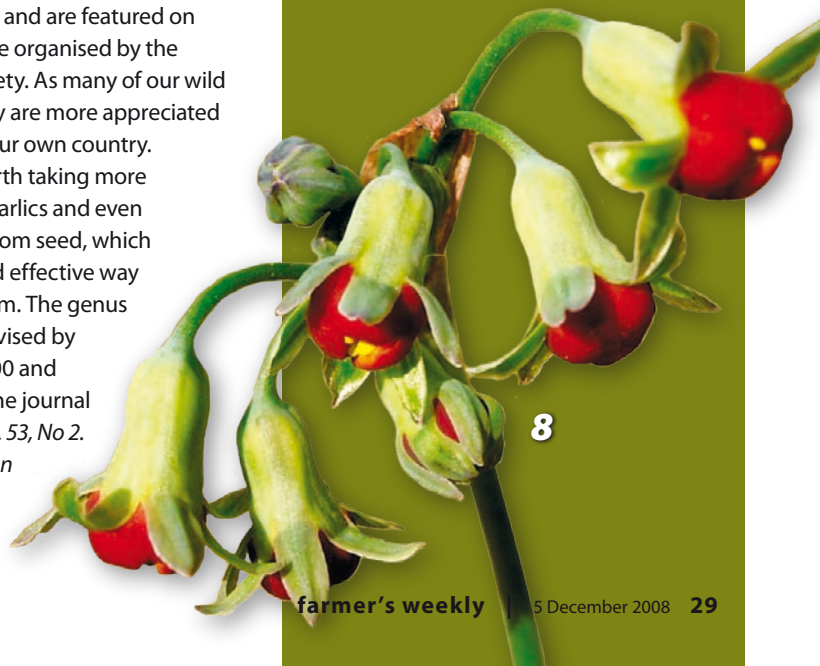
6. A *Tulbaghia* species from the farm Kaboega south of Somerset East, a plant yet to be classified and described.

7. *Tulbaghia violacea*, which is found from Knysna northwards to KwaZulu-Natal, has been developed as an important horticultural and landscaping species.

8. *Tulbaghia cernua* from the farm Middeldrift in the Cathcart district.



4



8