

Watsonia

the winter rainfall species



Watsonia angusta, photographed near Napier, grows in river beds and along stream banks. It makes an excellent landscaping subject.



A group of *Watsonia aletroides* on the roadside between Bredasdorp and Swellendam.

THE GENUS *WATSONIA* IS TYPICALLY South African, containing no fewer than 52 species, all of which are found within South Africa. Most species are strikingly attractive in bloom with tall, elegant spikes of long-lasting flowers. They're easy to grow and very popular as both garden and landscaping subjects. The spectacular massed displays

'The seeds are borne in tough, woody to leathery capsules.'

on mountain slopes and along roadsides in the moist regions often take our breath away and cause us to marvel at the floral wealth of our countryside.

Watsonia belong to the family Iridaceae, with the typical characteristic iris-like, sword-shaped leaves with a definite midrib. The rootstock is a corm, replaced annually in the growing season and often dividing and developing into large clumps. They can be deciduous to evergreen, depending on the species and the conditions in which

they grow. Tubular to trumpet-shaped flowers are borne on two-ranked spikes with colours varying typically from pink to orange and red, although mauve, white and even yellow flowers are found in some species. The seeds are borne in tough, woody to leathery capsules, which split when ripe, scattering the seed.

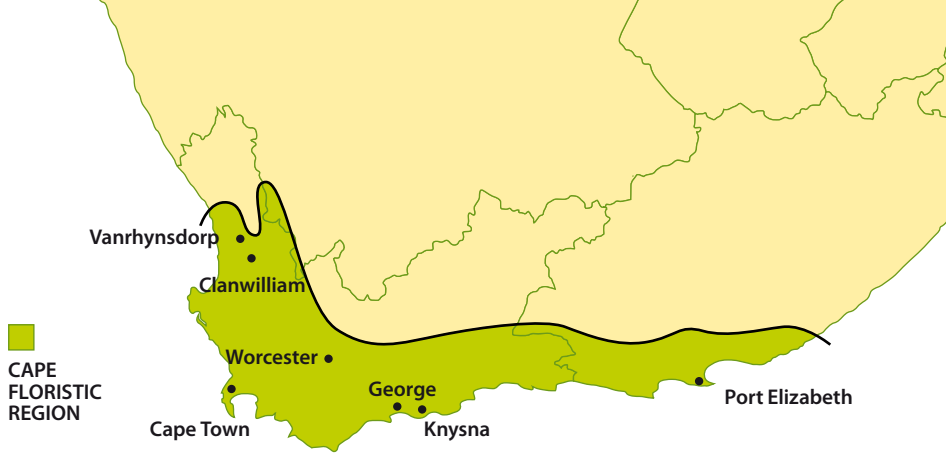
Like many other Iridaceae, *Watsonia* species can be divided into two distinct groups: those in the winter rainfall region exhibiting a winter growth cycle, and those of the summer rainfall region with a few extending through both regions. The summer rainfall species will be discussed next week. The Cape Floral Region is an important centre for *Watsonia* with 33 species occurring, mostly in the southwestern Cape, but extending northwards into Namaqualand and eastwards along the southern Cape mountains and coastal belt.

Most species are relatively common and widespread. Dry, open mountain slopes are the usual habitat. The very showy mauve-coloured *Watsonia borbonica*

Watsonias are strikingly attractive plants with tall, elegant spikes of long-lasting flowers. The spectacular massed displays on mountain slopes and along roadsides often take our breath away, writes **Cameron McMaster**.

is possibly the best-known and occurs widely in Fynbos and is often seen along roadsides in the Cape Peninsula and elsewhere. Many other species like *Watsonia schlechteri*, *Watsonia zeyheri* and *Watsonia fourcadei* grace the Cape Mountain passes. The latter is particularly abundant on the Outeniqua Pass above George.

Two very attractive smaller species, *Watsonia aletroides* and *Watsonia laccata*, occur in the Cape lowlands in more fertile shale and limestone-derived soils. These two species are more vulnerable as their habitat has been transformed by agriculture, and they are now largely confined to road reserves and other small, protected areas. *Watsonia aletroides* has narrow, tubular, red flowers with white tips. *Watsonia laccata* has shorter, more flared, pink flowers. The two species often occur in the same vicinity and hybrids between them are common. While most species are fairly tall and showy, a number of dwarf species have fewer flowers that are less often seen, but very attractive. *Watsonia coccineus*, *Watsonia humilis* and *Watsonia minima* are examples of these.



Watsonia borbonica, a large, showy species is widespread in the Western Cape mountains.

Watsonia spectabilis is a short species found on sandy flats near Elim. It has surprisingly large and very attractive scarlet flowers and very large, brown seed capsules that eventually split to scatter large, winged seeds, often more than 1cm in diameter.

Watsonia angusta is a moisture-loving species that occurs typically on stream banks. In this habitat it's less dependant on seasonal moisture and it's a species that extends far into the summer rainfall regions where it occupies similar niches right through into KwaZulu-Natal. It thrives in drier situations and because it's virtually evergreen and multiplies rapidly, it's very popular with landscapers, rapidly filling spaces in public and municipal gardens.

Understanding the plant

A word of warning, however, there are some very unattractive and dangerously invasive species of *Watsonia*, particularly the brown flowered form *Watsonia meriana*, which develops bulblets at the stem nodes that eventually drop off and proliferate, forming dense stands.

Referred as the form *bulbifera*, it has assumed alarmingly invasive proportions in winter rainfall regions of the world like California and south Australia, where it has no natural enemies.

Most watsonias are pollinated by sunbirds and are excellent plants to use to attract them to your garden. The Table Mountain beauty butterfly (*Aerpetes tulbaghia*), always a sucker for red flowers, is often seen on *Watsonia*. While watsonias are

easy-care plants that thrive without much attention, they're severely predated on by porcupines and moles. Some species can only survive in fissures and crevasses in rocky outcrops where their corms are protected. – Contact Cameron McMaster at cameron@haznet.co.za. |fw



Watsonia aletroides, an individual plant from the Agulhas plain showing the narrow tubular flowers.



Watsonia schlechteri inhabits Cape Mountain Fynbos where it flowers in midsummer.



Watsonia schlechteri flowering after a burn on Kleinberg near Napier.



Watsonia rogersii at home on the farm Fairfield near Napier.



- Some watsonias are a destructive invader species in some parts of the world.
- *Watsonia* belong to the family Iridaceae.
- Porcupines and moles eat the corms and can wipe out entire stands.