



Watsonia
DISTRIBUTION

Watsonia: *the summer rainfall species*

Watsonias are distinct, easily recognisable plants that are highly desirable as garden and landscaping subjects, and as cut flowers, writes **Cameron McMaster**.



THE GENUS *WATSONIA* CONTAINS no less than 52 species, all found in South Africa. *Watsonia* fall into two groups occurring in the winter rainfall region with a winter growth cycle, discussed last week, and the 21 species that occur in the summer rainfall region extending eastwards from the winter rainfall region.

The genus *Watsonia* was established in 1752 when plants from the Cape, grown in the Chelsea Physic Garden in London, were illustrated in Philip Miller's *Gardener's Dictionary*. The genus was named by Miller after his friend Sir William Watson, a London physician and naturalist.

Watsonia belong to the family Iridaceae, having the characteristic iris-like, sword-shaped leaves with a definite midrib. The summer rainfall *Watsonia* is more likely to be found in moist grassland regions where it is widely distributed from Port Elizabeth eastwards in

coastal grassland through the rolling hills of the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal, the mountain slopes of the Drakensberg and north into the highland areas of Mpumalanga and Limpopo. Often massed displays in spring and early summer provide a striking contrast in verdant green grassland. There is a centre

'A miniature Watsonia still waits for an identity.'

of high diversity in the Lydenburg and Pilgrims Rest area where no less than eight species are found. A second major centre of diversity is in the sandstone area of the northern coastal former Transkei and southern KwaZulu-Natal, which has a further eight species, nearly all of which are endemic or near endemic.

Grassland is subject to frequent fires that occur in late winter and spring. *Watsonia*, in common with all other grassland species, are well adapted to regular fire and stimulated to flower profusely after fire, often much earlier than



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in the absence of fire. It's interesting to observe how members of the same population flower at different times of the year, influenced by the effect of fire.

Watsonia corms are palatable and heavily predated on by animals such as porcupines. Consequently populations are often confined to rocky outcrops where their corms are protected.

Watsonia knysnana extends from the Tsitsikamma to the Amathole Mountains, and *Watsonia pillansii*, found in the same area, extends further north and east to KwaZulu-Natal. Both are fairly tall species with flowers of variable colour, although *Watsonia knysnana* are mostly pink to reddish in colour, while orange is the dominant colour in *Watsonia pillansii*, particularly in coastal populations. The inland populations are mostly red. However, while these two species are distinct in pure populations, in areas where they cohabit they appear to hybridise and produce variable fertile forms referred to as *Watsonia pillansii* hybrids. An older name for these forms was *Watsonia longifolia*, an appropriate name as most have fairly tall, evergreen leaves. In this case these multi-coloured populations of *Watsonia* such as on our family farm, Middledrift, in the Cathcart district, with colours ranging from white through pink and salmon to scarlet, would by any name look equally spectacular.

The beautiful large and deep pink *Watsonia amatolae* is an endemic with a very restricted distribution occurring only on the Amathole Mountains. It has a few tough greyish leaves, occurs on steep well-drained slopes and flowers in mid-summer. A similar species with which it can be



confused is confined to wetlands and bogs below Gaika's Kop in the Hogsback area. This *Watsonia* forms large clumps, has many narrow leaves and flowers later. It bears little resemblance to *Watsonia amatolae* and begs to be described as a new species.

The frustrating thing about South African wildflowers is that despite centuries of exploration, there are many forms and even new species that have not been adequately described. A miniature *Watsonia* we turned up on the slopes of Mt Thomas, after a burn some years ago,

still waits for an identity. I have lodged a number of specimens in herbaria for the attention of hard-working botanists.

When exploring new areas, one comes across magnificent stands of very distinct species. For instance, *Watsonia confusa*, a bright pink species with large dense heads, found in the Maclear district. It extends well into KwaZulu-Natal where it's replaced by *Watsonia densiflora*, which I saw for the first time near Balgowan. The small scarlet *Watsonia gladioloides* is my most recent. It's confined to highland grassland in the southern Drakensberg.

Watsonia is highly desirable as a garden and landscaping subject, and as cut flowers. Species such as *Watsonia pillansii* and *Watsonia angusta* have proved extremely popular. Established from seed, corms multiply by forming offsets and clumps can be lifted every two years and sold.

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- There are many forms that have not adequately been described.
- The corms multiply by forming offsets and can be harvested and sold.
- Porcupines and moles eat the corms so *Watsonia* often occur among rocky outcrops.



1. *Watsonia gladioloides* on the farm Balloch near Barkly East.

2. *Watsonia confusa* at the summit of Satan's Nek Pass near Ngobo in the Eastern Cape.

3. The red form of *Watsonia pillansii* flowering near Hogsback in the Eastern Cape.

4. *Watsonia* hybrids flower on Mt Kemp near Stutterheim.

5. A small and dainty species of *Watsonia* on the slopes of Mt Kubusie near Stutterheim. This species has not yet been described.

6. *Watsonia* massed in a wetland below Gaika's Kop near Hogsback. This species is yet to be described.