

Spectacular Babianas

These brilliant spring-flowering plants have many species – some cover the landscape in colour and others are rare and hard to find.

Babianas: Bobbejaantjies (Afrikaans)

BETWEEN JULY AND SEPTEMBER, the distinctive *Babianas* flower in the veld in the winter rainfall region. They form an important component of the vast range of spring-flowering bulbs in the southwestern Cape.

In the *Colour Encyclopedia of Cape Bulbs* by John Manning, Peter Goldblatt and Dee Snijman (Timber Press 2002) *Babianas* are described as small to medium-sized deciduous geophytes (plants with underground storage organs) with deep-seated corms, usually with a tough fibrous neck, pleated usually hairy leaves, and medium to large, mainly blue to violet flowers. The pleated leaf blades, sometimes set at an oblique angle, are very distinctive, and the plants are not easily confused with other genera in the Iridaceae family, to which *Babianas* belong.

To discover and identify the very many species of *Babiana* is quite a challenge.

Some species are fairly common and widespread, while others are very rare and localised. Because most *Babianas* are adapted to shale-derived clay soils in Renosterveld, much of their habitat has been destroyed under cultivation in areas such as the Swartland and the Overberg. In these areas *Babianas* are now confined to relict patches (surviving remnants) of Renosterveld too rough to cultivate.

In the Napier area *Babiana patersoniae* makes spectacular massed displays on the town commonage when it flowers in late September. We have had both fun and satisfaction locating and identifying the *Babianas* in the Napier-Caledon region and have so far recorded five species – *Babiana ambigua*, *Babiana patula*, *Babiana patersoniae*, *Babiana purpurea* and *Babiana montana*, the latter a rare species not often seen. Sometimes their strong scent is the first sign of their presence.

Special adaptations

There are some interesting anomalies to be found amongst the various species. For instance two bright-red species, *Babiana thunbergii* and *Babiana ringens*, have flowers especially adapted for pollination by sunbirds, and *B. ringens* has even developed a rigid spike on which the sunbird can perch. These two species are adapted to deep sandy soils and are very well suited to sandy coastal gardens.

Another strange feature is the truncate leaves of some species – leaves that end abruptly in a square, toothed tip, as though they have been cropped by a grazing animal. *Babiana flabellifolia* and *Babiana pubescens* from Namaqualand and *Babiana cuneata* from the Roggeveld are examples of this strange feature.



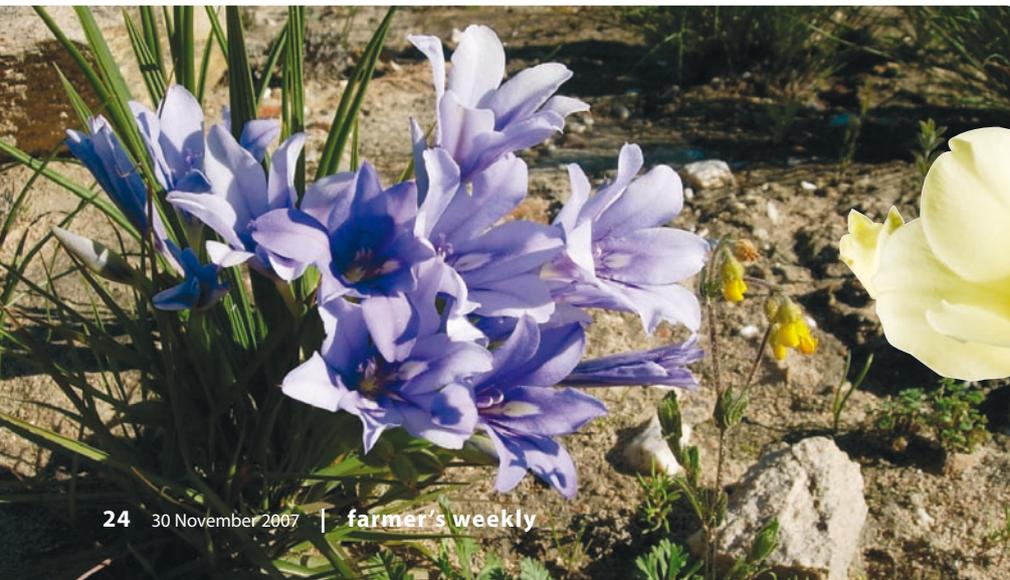
RIGHT: *Babiana purpurea* photographed on a road verge near Caledon, Western Cape.

BOTTOM LEFT: *Babiana sambucina* photographed on the Potjiesberg Pass south of Uniondale, Eastern Cape.

BOTTOM RIGHT: The rare and beautiful *Babiana pygmaea*, grown from seed and flowering in my garden. It comes from the Darling region.

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- Most *Babianas* are found in Renosterveld and are threatened by cultivation.
- The many species show extensive adaptations and habitat variations.
- *Babianas* are excellent low-maintenance garden plants.



The stunning *Babiana rubrocyanea* grown from seed and flowering in my Napier garden. It comes from the Darling-Mamre area.



Babiana cuneata photographed below the Komsberg Pass south of Sutherland. Note the naturally truncated leaves, which seem to have been cropped by a grazing animal.

For sheer beauty and spectacular colouring, *Babiana pygmaea*, a rare and localised species from Darling, with cream flowers and dark centres, and the scarlet *Babiana villosa* from Tulbagh, are stunning. The purple *Babiana rubrocyanea* with its red centre, also known as *kelkiewyn*, is another exceptional species. The yellow *Babiana odorata* lives up to its name and a vase of them can fill the air with perfume.

Babiana sambucina has the widest distribution of the winter rainfall species, occurring in rocky sandstone-derived soils from the Koue Bokkeveld to as far east as Uitenhage and Addo. I've seen this lovely species flowering profusely in late August on the Potjiesberg Pass south of Uniondale.

Babianas are very worthwhile garden and rockery subjects, being easy to grow in well-drained loamy or sandy soils. They don't need much watering and are relatively pest-free. They grow readily from seed and flower within two to three years of sowing.

Seed is obtainable from reputable indigenous seed suppliers, and Botanical Society members can obtain seed free – one of the advantages of membership. Corms offered by large commercial nurseries for autumn planting and spring flowering are usually selected hybrids, and are most attractive as garden plants. – *Cameron McMaster* (cameron@haznet.co.za). |fw

Classifying Babianas

The genus *Babiana* was established by Ker Gawler for the type species *Babiana plicata*, which was featured in *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* in August 1802. The name is an anglicised version of the common name – *bobbejaantjies* – so called because their corms were a favourite food of baboons. For many years there was much confusion over which species should be included in this genus. The first authoritative revision of *Babiana* was undertaken by G Joyce Lewis in 1959, published as Supplementary Volume No 111 of the *South African Journal of Botany*. In this monograph, Lewis recognised 61 species. In 2007 a very comprehensive illustrated revision by Peter Goldblatt and John Manning (*Strelitzia 18*) was published by the South African National Biodiversity Institute. In this up-to-date revision 88 species are listed, 86 of which occur in the winter rainfall zone extending from southwestern Namibia to Port Elizabeth. The remaining two species (*Babiana hypogaea* and *Babiana bainsii*) are found across the summer rainfall region of Southern Africa from southeastern Namibia and the upper Karoo to Zambia.

Babiana villosa is confined to small relict patches of Renosterveld in the Tulbagh area.



Babiana thunbergii, which grows in dune sand near Dwarskersbos on the West Coast, is adapted for sunbird pollination.