

# Not only diversity makes *Cyrtanthus* exceptional

The rarest of our *Cyrtanthus* species is the Bredasdorp lily, found only the lower sandstone slopes of the mountains around Bredasdorp. No adjectives adequately describe the beauty of this rare species.

**N**OT ALL *CYRTANTHUS* ARE dependent on or stimulated by fire to bloom. There are other fascinating species within this large and diverse group of bulbous plants, and two Western Cape and one Richtersveld species, in particular, are worthy of mention.

*Cyrtanthus carneus* is a large robust species, confined primarily to sandstone-derived soils extending from Stanford along the lower coastal mountains and adjacent foothills in fynbos to as far east as Mossel Bay. It is exceptional not only because of its magnificent scarlet flowers, borne on

seen in bloom and is quite a challenge to track down. The hiking trails in the Potberg, which forms part of the De Hoop Nature Reserve east of Bredasdorp, are one of the best places to view *Cyrtanthus carneus* as there are numerous specimens along the lower parts of the trails.

Judging by its rarity and irregular flowering and seeding, the sustainability of present populations, many of which have been overtaken by alien pines and acacias, is a matter of concern. Attempts to cultivate it have so far met with little success.

## A Richtersveld species

*Cyrtanthus herrei* is another large and beautiful species closely related to *Cyrtanthus carneus*, eking out its existence in partly shaded rocky kloofs in

the arid Richtersveld. While it hardly ever rains here, frequent mists roll in from the west coast and this plant is sustained by moisture condensing on its large strap-like leaves and on the surrounding rocks between which its roots are anchored.

## The exquisite Bredasdorp lily

Undoubtedly the rarest of our *Cyrtanthus* species is *Cyrtanthus guthrieae*, known locally as the Bredasdorp lily, because it is confined exclusively to the lower sandstone slopes of the mountains around Bredasdorp where it survives in a few small populations. No adjectives adequately describe the beauty of this rare species, with its glittering scarlet blooms, petals with minute gold flecks and prominent bright yellow stamens.

It was described in 1921, based on paintings made by a lady named L Guthrie in the Bredasdorp district in 1917. Although not

numerous, the bulbs flower regularly in March and April.

It is highly threatened, its existence depending on the farmers on whose land it still occurs. Regrettably,

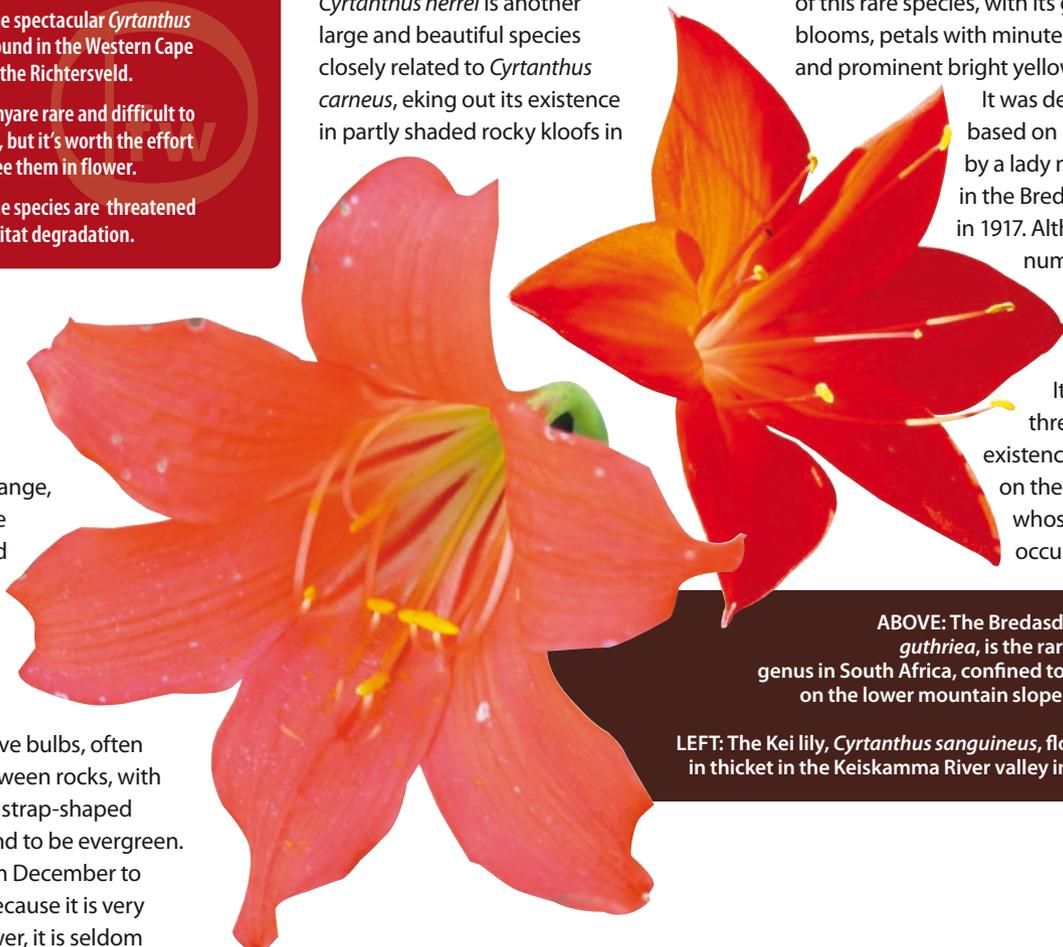
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- Some spectacular *Cyrtanthus* are found in the Western Cape and the Richtersveld.
- Many are rare and difficult to find, but it's worth the effort to see them in flower.
- Some species are threatened by habitat degradation.

stout stems up to 80cm high, but because it is sparsely distributed throughout its range, occurring off the beaten track and consequently seldom seen.

Plants grow to a great age, forming large clumps of massive bulbs, often in crevasses between rocks, with many sub-erect strap-shaped leaves which tend to be evergreen.

It flowers from December to February, but because it is very reluctant to flower, it is seldom



ABOVE: The Bredasdorp lily, *Cyrtanthus guthrieae*, is the rarest member of this genus in South Africa, confined to small populations on the lower mountain slopes near Bredasdorp.

LEFT: The Kei lily, *Cyrtanthus sanguineus*, flowering on a ledge in thicket in the Keiskamma River valley in the Eastern Cape.

its habitat is being degraded by livestock and invasive alien trees – primarily eucalyptus. I believe a major effort needs to be made to rehabilitate and conserve the areas where it occurs.

### The George lily

The well-known George lily, previously named *Vallota speciosa* and now classified as *Cyrtanthus elatus*, is a familiar plant in many gardens. It occurs naturally in the Outeniqua Mountains around George. It is easy to cultivate and produces copious numbers of bulblets around the parent plant, making it easy to propagate.

*'The Eastern Cape is home to many species of Cyrtanthus, and could justifiably be regarded as the headquarters of the genus.'*

Although it is shy to flower, when it does so the spectacular beauty of its large blooms are reward enough. It comes in red and pink forms, white being rare, and is freely available from nurseries.

### Eastern Cape species

The Eastern Cape is home to many species of *Cyrtanthus*, and could justifiably be regarded as the headquarters of the genus. Possibly the most familiar of all is the well-known Ifafa lily, *Cyrtanthus mackenii*, which occurs along streams in riverine forest from East London to the south coast of KwaZulu-Natal.

While it is mostly the bright yellow evergreen form flowering in early spring that occurs in the wild, many colours are available from nurseries and it is one of the easiest and most rewarding shade-loving bulbs to grow and propagate from offsets.

A deciduous subspecies, *Cyrtanthus mackenii* subsp. *cooperi*, is a rather dull maize-coloured form, very common in open grassland further inland from Macleantown right through the Transkei to Ugie and Maclear. Although common and flowering freely in early spring, its dull colouring makes it rather insignificant and it is easily overlooked.

### A rare and glamorous species

One of the most glamorous of the *Cyrtanthus* species is *Cyrtanthus huttonii*, but because of its specialised habitat it is seldom seen. It can be found clinging to moist mountain cliffs and in forests such as those in the

Amatola range of the Eastern Cape. It also occurs on the edges of mountain streams at high altitudes from the Katberg to the southern Drakensberg in the Barkly East and Rhodes districts. This large plant with many apple-green leaves often festoons ledges near waterfalls – it needs a damp area where water can filter past its roots.

Flowering takes place in December. The flowers are very beautiful, consisting of many bright orange hanging tubular blooms that contrast with the deep maroon bract that enfolds them. It is well worth hiking to likely spots when it is in flower, such as the Hogsback area,

where it occurs near waterfalls and on cliffs all the way to the summit of Gaika's Kop.

Another of the *Cyrtanthus* gems of the Eastern Cape is *Cyrtanthus obliquus* – a large evergreen species with a symmetrical umbel of pendulous orange tubular flowers tipped with yellow or green. First observed in the Knysna area, it has been called the Knysna lily, and is distributed from Knysna in the west to southern KwaZulu-Natal. However, it is most common in the Eastern Cape.

Typically it grows in rock outcrops in thicket vegetation, often in fairly dry areas well off the beaten track. It has a long flowering season – I have observed flowers in all months between October and February. Mostly one has to visit the remote habitats where it occurs, but an easily accessible place to see it is the Ecce Pass Nature Reserve near Grahamstown where it grows together with a wealth of interesting wild plants in this fascinating succulent thicket vegetation.

The Kei lily (*Cyrtanthus sanguineus*) is another of South Africa's wildflowers that has made a successful transition to many gardens. It grows in rock fissures and on ledges on cliffs in deep shady ravines in the Eastern Cape. Its bulbs multiply freely by making offsets, very soon overcrowding the sometimes cramped situations in which they grow. They are not inhibited in the least by overcrowding and flower well in crowded pots, making them a very rewarding patio subject. – Cameron McMaster (cameron@haznet.co.za). |fw



#### FROM TOP TO BOTTOM:

- Close-up of the magnificent flower of *Cyrtanthus obliquus*.
- The spectacular *Cyrtanthus carneus* surviving in a pine-infested area near Napier in the Western Cape. This large and showy species is confined to fynbos in the southern Cape.
- The George lily (*Cyrtanthus elatus*) is a popular garden bulb originating in the Outeniqua region of the West Cape. It has both red and pink variations.