

■ wildflower conservation

# Dierama – the graceful hairbells

Accounts by early travellers give glowing descriptions of the spring countryside carpeted by hairbells.

Alas, this sight is very seldom seen today as many are vulnerable to grazing and now only occur in protected areas and along roadsides.

**O**UR GRACEFUL HAIRBELLS belong to a relatively small genus of bulbous plants, *Dierama*, belonging to the Iridaceae, the iris family.

The name is derived from the Greek *dierama*, a funnel, alluding to the shape of the flowers.

They are extremely elegant and beautiful with pendulous bell-shaped or funnel-shaped flowers in various shades of pink to mauve.

From tufts of evergreen grass-like foliage, slender wiry stems emerge from which clusters of flowers dangle on even finer thread-like short filaments.

As the flowers develop, their increasing weight causes the main stem to bend like a fishing rod under strain.

When the seeds develop in the round capsules, the extra weight can cause the stems of some plants to gracefully bend much more and in some cases the

tip almost touches the ground.

Even after the flowers have fallen and before the seed capsules develop, the bracts from which the flowers emerge (usually a silvery or brown colour), have the appearance of a tall elegant grass in flower, especially when the plants occur in reasonable clumps.

In the revision of the genus, titled *Dierama, The Hairbells of Africa* by Hilliard and Burt, a book beautifully illustrated by Auriol Batten and published by Acorn

wedding-bell and flowering grass. In the UK they are sometimes called wand flowers or more frequently, and romantically, angel's fishing rods or Venus's fishing rods.

Being evergreen, they are adapted to summer rainfall and thus to the eastern and northern parts of South Africa, their westerly range ending at Knysna. They are adapted to the regular fires that occur in grassland, re-sprouting and flowering prolifically after fire. In the Eastern Cape

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Books in 1991, 44 species are listed, of which most occur in South Africa. Several species occur at relatively high altitude in tropical East Africa, in Zimbabwe, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Malawi and Mozambique, with one species in Ethiopia. They are collectively known as hairbells, because of the fine hairlike stems from which the flowers hang. Several other common names in South Africa are fairy-bell, grassy-bell (*grasklokkie*),

and KwaZulu-Natal, they may be found from just above sea level to the top of the Drakensberg escarpment, but in the tropics *Dierama* are largely montane. Despite its wide distribution, *Dierama* is restricted to a single major habitat – moist grassland.

*Dierama pendulum* was the first species to be discovered and appropriately named by the famous early Swedish botanist and explorer, Carl Thunberg, who came





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across the light blue-mauve flowers near the Kromme River in the Humansdorp district during his epic journey to the Eastern Cape in 1772. It's the most westerly occurring species extending from the Kei River to as far west as Knysna. It's also one of the earliest to flower in spring.

In the Eastern Cape, *Dierama igneum* graces the grassland from East London, where paler forms occur, through the Ciskei and Border areas where there are darker pink forms inland.

*Dierama pulcherrimum*, another Eastern Cape endemic, is a tall robust species with large flowers and is found further inland at higher altitudes.

There are magnificent dark burgundy-coloured forms on Mount Kemp near Stutterheim and on the Katberg – two populations that are now under severe threat from degradation by overstocking and alien vegetation. However, there are still large numbers of these lovely plants on the prominent peak, Gaika's Kop, near Hogsback.

Two other dark purple-coloured species are found in the Eastern Cape and Transkei. *Dierama atrum* occurs from Stutterheim eastwards and the beautiful *Dierama reynoldsii* grows on the Potberg Pass near Maclear and eastwards to southern KwaZulu Natal.

At higher altitudes extending from the Eastern Cape into Lesotho and the northern

Drakensberg, one encounters another tall and graceful species *Dierama robustum* and the smaller *Dierama pauciflorum*. *Dierama dracomontanum*, named for its locality in the high Drakensberg, is a very popular garden plant in the UK where it's hardy enough to withstand the cold wet winters.

One of the easiest species to grow and which we have found to be very suitable for landscaping because it's evergreen and multiplies rapidly, is *Dierama medium*, which is found wild in the highlands of Mpumalanga and Swaziland.

#### Cultivation

Hairbells come from areas of summer rainfall so they like moisture in the growing season, particularly in mid-summer when they flower, but they are adapted to dry conditions in winter. Corms do not favour waterlogged conditions in winter, so they will not grow well in heavy or clay soils.

They don't need a rich soil but will respond to a little feeding, periodically.

It's more important to re-invigorate clumps of corms by periodically digging them up, splitting them up and removing the old dead basal corms.

They should then be replanted 50mm to 100mm deep, depending on the size, and 50mm or more apart to allow for each corm to clump up without over-crowding.

Corms are available from registered indigenous nurseries. *Dierama* can easily be grown from seed and can flower within three to four years from sowing.

Next week's column will be entirely devoted to the most impressive and also the most threatened species of hairbell *Dierama grandiflorum* which has a very restricted range in the mountains in the Somerset East and Graaff Reinet regions. – Cameron McMaster (cameron@haznet.co.za) |fw



1. *Dierama pulcherrimum* on the slopes of Mount Kemp in the Eastern Cape. This dark-burgundy form is very rare.

2. *Dierama pauciflorum* found at high altitudes in the Drakensberg and Lesotho.

3. *Dierama reynoldsii* on the Potberg Pass near Maclear.

4. *Dierama robustum* on the farm Balloch, near Barkly East.

5. *Dierama dracomontanum* in a garden in Devon in the UK.

6. *Dierama igneum*, an Eastern Cape endemic, near Hogsback.

7. The more common pink form of *Dierama pulcherrimum* in the Eastern Cape.

8. *Dierama robustum* on Naude's Neck near Rhodes in the Eastern Cape.



- Despite its wide distribution, *Dierama* is restricted to a single major habitat – moist grassland.
- They are well adapted to survive fire and resprout and flower.
- Some *Dierama* can survive the cold and wet climate in the UK.