

HAEMANTHUS – *Paint Brush Flowers*

Paint brush flowers occur naturally in a vast range of habitats and make pleasant garden subjects that are relatively easy to maintain, writes **Cameron McMaster**.

CONFINED TO SOUTH AFRICA and Namibia, the 22 known *Haemanthus* species are characteristically fleshy, often hairy plants, well known for their compact, brush-like flowers. They belong to the Amaryllidaceae family and like other genera in the family they flower in mid-to late summer after a dormant period. The leaves appear after flowering and persist through autumn and winter.

Bulbs of *Haemanthus* were among the first plants gathered at the Cape and subsequently cultivated in the gardens of Europe. The earliest known description appeared in 1605 when plants (probably *H coccineus* and *H sanguineus*) were given the phrase name *Narcissus africanus sive Narcissus exoticus*. The name *Haemanthus* was first proposed by Hermann in 1687 and thereafter appeared in many publications in the form of *Haemanthus africanus*. The

last comprehensive taxonomic treatment of *Haemanthus* was by Dr Deirdré Snijman of the Compton Herbarium at Kirstenbosch in Cape Town and published in the 1984 *Journal of South African Botany, Supplementary Volume No 12*, from which much of the information in this article has been taken. She lists 21 species in this revision and subsequently described a further species, *Haemanthus paucifolius*.

Interesting diversity

Of the 22 species, 14 occur exclusively in the winter rainfall region with a concentration of species in the dry Namaqualand region of the northwest Cape. Six species occur exclusively in the summer rainfall region and there are two species which overlap into both regions, namely *Haemanthus coccineus*, which has the widest range extending from Namaqualand to the Keiskamma River in the Eastern Cape and *Haemanthus albiflos*, which is a summer rainfall species extending as far west as



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- The plants often establish themselves in unusual places such as on almost vertical cliffs.
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Still Bay in the winter rainfall region. Most species bear two leaves each year. In the evergreen species *Haemanthus albiflos* and *Haemanthus deformis*, leaves persist beyond a year, resulting in four to six visible leaves. The majority of individuals in *Haemanthus unifolius* and *Haemanthus nortieri* and *Haemanthus paucifolius* have a solitary leaf, but in the latter species, being evergreen, the leaves persists and the bulb may exhibit two leaves.

Haemanthus flowers are borne in an umbel surrounded by membranous to fleshy bracts, the position, number and texture of which are taxonomically important. The fruit is a fleshy berry which, when ripe, is soft and pulpy, varying in colour from white to yellow and orange to red and various shades of pink, depending on the species. The seeds are succulent, smooth and greenish-white or wine red. When in fruit, the flowering stem elongates and gradually flops to the ground, dropping the seeds around the plant. This mode of dispersal is thought to be one in which the seeds are shed in "safe-sites", namely patches close to the suitable parent habitat. However, the species' ability to spread is limited. It's a puzzle to me how plants of *Haemanthus humilis* could become established on almost vertical places between rock strata and on cliffs where they grow. When handling ripe seed, I soon realised it was due to the fact that the seeds are connected to sticky threads that enable



ABOVE: A beautiful cerise colour of *Haemanthus humilis* found near New Bethesda in the Karoo.

RIGHT: The Giant form of *Haemanthus humilis*, which occurs naturally on cliffs in the Great Kei River Valley



FAR LEFT: The evergreen shade-loving *Haemanthus albiflos* flowers in mid-winter. Its seed capsules turn scarlet when ripe, making it an excellent garden subject.

RIGHT: The very rare *Haemanthus caniculata* is confined to a small population in the Betty's Bay area of the Western Cape.

BOTTOM RIGHT: *Haemanthus carneus* is another rare endemic species confined to the Bosberg near Somerset East.

PHOTOS: CAMERON McMASTER



them to adhere to virtually any surface and, under favourable conditions they become rooted seedlings. This feature is probably common to other cliff-growing species.

The *Haemanthus humilis* group, a summer rainfall species, flower from mid-summer. The winter rainfall species flower in autumn. A number of species in the winter rainfall region are locally endemic and under considerable threat. The most notable of these are *Haemanthus tristis*, *Haemanthus canaliculatus*, *Haemanthus pumilio* and *Haemanthus lanceifolius*. The *Haemanthus albiflos* group are evergreen and flower in winter or early spring. I have been fascinated by the variability of populations, particularly of the *Haemanthus humilis*, which is widespread, but occurs

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in isolated and localised populations in specialised habitats, which is probably the reason for the variation between populations. The most spectacular form is one we call Giant, a specimen of which we observed with the aid of binoculars, growing on a steep cliff in full shade on the opposite bank of the Great Kei River. It has leaves as large as 60cm and has an enormous flower head. In sharp contrast is a miniature form found growing in grassland near King William's Town with tiny flower heads on stems less than 20cm in height. Another noteworthy variation of *H humilis* is an early flowering form in the Graaff-Reinet area of the central Karoo. This form has small cerise flowers with bright yellow stamens – very attractive. Closely allied to *Haemanthus humilis* is the enigmatic

Haemanthus carneus known from only a very few populations. This rare species flowers in January and is distinguished by a looser, widely spreading umbel and stamens included well within the flowers, the only known *Haemanthus* with this feature. It has the same growth pattern as *Haemanthus humilis*, with leaves that emerge just after flowering and persist to late spring. It occurs in Acacia thicket and grassland on the mountains near Somerset East.

The evergreen *Haemanthus albiflos* is widespread and amazingly adaptive and versatile in its habitat. It's particularly desirable, easy to grow and suitable as ground cover in areas of semi-shade. It's equally at home in deep shade on forest floors, on rocky sea shores exposed to salt spray, in coastal dune forest, on cliff faces in hot river valleys where it clings in large clumps to crevasses in full sun, and in shady places on high altitude inland mountain ranges. It's evergreen and multiplies vegetatively, as well as from seed. The attractive white flowers appear in May and the ripe seeds are carried in equally attractive clusters of scarlet fruit.

Other habitats

It's very surprising to find the West Cape species, *Haemanthus coccineus*, which flowers in autumn, occurring as far east as the Keiskamma River valley near Hamburg. It grows here in Valley Thicket vegetation. *Haemanthus coccineus* occurs from here, a summer rainfall region, westwards through the winter rainfall region of the Western Cape and up to the arid regions of Namaqualand and Namibia, an enormous range of over 2 000km and of climate variation. The flower stems can be reddish or blotched with red and the leaves have varying degrees of stripes and dots on the underside.

Haemanthus is easy to propagate from seed and germinates soon after ripening. Sowing seed is easier after the radicle has formed, when they can be placed in rows in a seed box of well-drained seedling mix with the radicle in the soil and the seed on the surface. The secret is well-drained soil rich in organic matter. Winter rainfall species should be kept dry in summer and only watered when the growing season commences in late summer. Summer rainfall species are more tolerant of watering and shouldn't be allowed to dry out completely in their dormant phase. Evergreen species should be kept moist all year round. The wonderful flowers eventually produced are an ample reward for the patience and care in growing them.

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