

The flowering lachenalias

Southern Africa's lachenalias superficially resemble European hyacinths, yet they're infinitely more beautiful and impressive, writes **Cameron McMaster**.

HAVING REACHED THE LETTER L we come to one of the most decorative and interesting groups among our fascinating and diverse flora – the lachenalias (*viooltjies*).

Sometimes referred to as Cape cowslips, the genus *Lachenalia* is named after the eminent Swiss professor Werner de Lachenal. It's classified under the family Hyacinthaceae, and hence can be called "our own Cape hyacinths". Lachenalias superficially resemble European hyacinths, but in terms of species numbers and variation in colour, shape and beauty, they are infinitely more impressive.

An interesting variety

Lachenalia, with at least 120 species, is the largest genus within the family Hyacinthaceae and it is endemic to Southern Africa.

They are small, deciduous bulbous plants with one or more leaves, but usually two, and a spike of tubular to bell-shaped flowers. The flowers vary in colour from blue and yellow to white predominating, and a few species are a brilliant red.

With one exception they all follow a winter growth and summer dormancy cycle and flower from May to October, depending on the species. The exception is *Lachenalia pearsonii* from

southern Namibia, which grows in summer and is dormant in winter. It's interesting to note that even those few species that occur exclusively in the summer rainfall region follow the typical winter growth cycle. Most are propagated from seed but some species also produce offsets when the bulbs split. Others like *Lachenalia bulbifera* produce copious numbers of bulbils, which develop into new plants. Most species occur in southern Namaqualand, the southwestern

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and the Western Cape, and a few extend to the Karoo, the Eastern Cape and the southeastern Free State. The habitats vary greatly from sandy coastal plains, mountain fynbos, renosterveld and grassland, to the succulent and Nama Karoo plains.

Indeed it's remarkable to find such delicate plants flowering in such inhospitable places as the Knersvlakte and Tanqua Karoo. The centre of diversity is the Worcester area where a large number of different species can be found. Most favour open, exposed sites

- While many lachenalias are common, others are very rare.
- Abreeding and selection programme at Roodeplaat has produced spectacular results.
- Lachenalias flourish in inhospitable habitats.



in full sun. Populations occur as widely scattered single plants or in dense stands that make spectacular displays, especially after fires when they are stimulated to flower in profusion, as *Lachenalia juncifolia* did after a fire in the De Hoop Nature Reserve in the Western Cape.

Seasonal variation

The earliest species to flower in April and May is *Lachenalia rubida*, with striking reddish flowers and attractive spotted foliage and stems. It occurs in coastal dunes and on the flats along the southern Cape coast. *Lachenalia bulbifera* flowers a little later in June and July and is another striking red species, occurring on sandy plains along the west and southern Cape coast.

While many lachenalias are common and widespread, others are very rare and occur only in single, isolated populations, making them extremely vulnerable. An example of such a species is *Lachenalia mathewsii*, a bright yellow species that occurs in a

RIGHT: *Lachenalia bulbifera* photographed near Stuisbaai. It's found in sandy areas near the coast

FAR RIGHT: *Lachenalia mathewsii* occurs in one population near Vredenburg and was thought extinct for many years. It was rediscovered recently.





Lachenalia zebrina is adapted to the arid conditions of the Tanqua Karoo

single population near Vredenburg on the West Coast. It was thought to be extinct for many years and was rediscovered about 20 years ago. Others, because of their growth habits are very rarely seen. For instance *Lachenalia sargeantii* only flowers after fire (see box: **The fire flower**).

An interesting discovery

The first lachenalias were collected by Jan van Riebeeck on his epic journey to Namaqualand in 1685/6. The plant, eventually named *Lachenalia hirta*, was the first to be introduced to European collectors, but was followed by many more as the Cape flora became better known.

Today they have been highly selected and are popular as pot and garden plants in Europe. A breeding and selection programme at our own plant research station, Roodeplaat near Pretoria, has produced some spectacular hybrids and cultivars, which have been brought into the horticultural trade. However, many wild species are very attractive, easy to grow and make excellent pot plants and rockery subjects, and seeds and bulbs are available from reputable suppliers. Although our knowledge of the genus has been augmented by various botanists over the years, a full revision has not yet been published. The West Cape species are adequately covered in *The Colour*

Encyclopedia of Cape Bulbs by Manning, Goldblatt and Snijman, published by Timber Press. Graham Duncan, who is in charge of the bulb collection at Kirstenbosch, has made *Lachenalia* his special field of study.

In 1988 he published *The Lachenalia Handbook*, Vol 17 of the *Annals of Kirstenbosch*. This very useful book describes and illustrates over 80 species. Graham is presently working on a comprehensive revision of the genus, which should be published shortly.

Making discoveries

It was Graham who first introduced me to *Lachenalia*, when many years ago we accompanied him to find one of the special, small Eastern Cape species, *Lachenalia campanulata*. We found it on the upper slopes of the Katberg, in an area that is now communal land and severely degraded by overgrazing. Its chances of survival there are slim. Fortunately it's well protected in some other localities such as on private land in the Elandsberg and Cathcart district and in the Waainek Wild Flower Reserve on the Bosberg above Somerset East. Lachenalias are distinctive and easily recognised and it's an interesting challenge for farmers and landowners in the Western and Northern Cape to look out for them.

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The fire flower

The enigmatic *Lachenalia sargeantii* is a species entirely dependant on fire to flower.

Discovered in 1971 after a burn on the mountain above Bredasdorp, it was photographed and specimens were placed in the bulb collection at Kirstenbosch. It wasn't seen again by anyone and was thought to have disappeared. However, 33 years later, while investigating a recently burned tract of fynbos near Napier, we came across what we recognised as the elusive *L. sargeantii*. It was hard to miss such a spectacularly beautiful flower. Other colonies were also found after burns in other areas near Napier. Follow-up visits to all the sites a year and two years later, however, failed to reveal any signs of the plants. They simply went into a rest phase to patiently wait to flower after the next fire maybe 20 to 30 years hence.

It was a remarkable privilege to be one of so few people to have seen a plant that flowers so rarely. Graham Duncan reports that the *L. sargeantii* in the bulb collection at Kirstenbosch, although producing leaves, has never flowered even when treated with a smoke solution or actual fire on the pots. The special prompt that triggers flowering after a fire remains a mystery.

