

# ORNITHOGALUM – the popular chincherinchees

Chincherinchee flowers have a long vase life and consequently are cultivated for distribution all over the world, writes **Cameron McMaster**.

**C**HINCHERINCHEE IS THE COMMON name for the species *Ornithogalum*, which has been a popular garden plant and an important export cut flower for the past 100 years or more.

The genus *Ornithogalum* is classified under the plant family Hyacinthaceae and consists of about 120 species distributed in Africa and Eurasia. The majority occur in Southern Africa, with 43 species in the Cape Floral Region.

*Ornithogalum* are perennial bulbous plants that are deciduous or, rarely, evergreen and they have spikes of mostly white or yellow-to-orange star-like or cup-shaped flowers borne on erect stems. Most species are toxic to animals and if ingested result in a condition known as *krimpsiekte*.

The best known chincherinchee, *Ornithogalum thyrsoides*, is widespread in the Western Cape, occurring in a variety of habitats from coastal sandy flats to clay soils in lowland areas and in damp seeps. It flowers from October to December and has attractive white flowers, sometimes with dark centres that are particularly long-lasting. They can remain fresh in a vase for weeks, even a month or more. Because of this trait they've been commercially

cultivated, initially around Darling but later elsewhere. The flowers used to be shipped by sea to Europe and the US for use as winter cut flowers at Christmas. Flowers destined for shipping were picked in bud and the cut stem dipped in wax before packing.

On arrival at destinations several weeks later, the waxed tip was cut off and the stems placed in water to stimulate the flowers to open. Nowadays, cut flowers are distributed by air, but the long vase life is still an important feature.

This species and its hybrids are currently cultivated throughout the world.

*'The waxed tip was cut off and the stems placed in water.'*

*Ornithogalum umbellatum* and *Ornithogalum arabicum* are very similar Mediterranean species, commonly known as the star of Bethlehem, and also popular garden plants cultivated for use as cut flowers.

#### What's in a name?

The derivation of both common and scientific names of wild flowers is a fascinating subject covered in an interesting

• Approximately 120 species of *Ornithogalum* occur in Africa and Eurasia.

• To ship cut blooms by sea the ends of the stems were dipped in wax.

• The derivation of the names of species is an interesting subject.



booklet by Prof WPU Jackson, titled *Origins and Meanings of Plant Names of South African Plant Genera* and published by the University of Cape Town Botany Department and available at Botanical Society book shops.

It says the name *Ornithogalum* is from the Greek *ornithos*, meaning bird, and *gala* which means milk. This refers to the milk-like secretions produced in pigeons' crops for feeding their young. Bird's milk was colloquial in Ancient Greek for something beautiful. The popular name chincherinchee, is said to imitate the sound of stems rubbing against each other in the strong southeasterly winds where they grow.

Like most South African wildflowers there are many lesser known and obscure species of *Ornithogalum* occurring throughout the country. Recent revisions in the family Hyacinthaceae have absorbed related genera such as *Albuca*, *Dipcadi* and *Galtonia* into *Ornithogalum*. However, I and many of my amateur associates prefer to stick





with the old classification and still regard these as separate genera. Consequently the original circumscription of the genus is adhered to in this discussion.

#### From unusual to abundant

The majority of the large flowered species occur in the winter rainfall region. However, there are some notable exceptions.

*Ornithogalum saundersiae*, the giant white chinchinchee, flowers in mid-summer and has large, many-flowered heads on stems up to 1,5m tall. It occurs in northern KwaZulu-Natal, Swaziland and Mpumalanga. *Ornithogalum synanthifolium*, an attractive east Cape species, occurs near forest margins and in some years covers the countryside around Keiskamma Hoek in spring. It's almost evergreen and rivals *Ornithogalum thyrsoides* as both a garden and landscaping plant, and as a cut flower.

There are a number of attractive yellow and orange chinchinchees, the best known being *Ornithogalum dubium*. It varies from 20cm tall to very short, diminutive forms. It occurs more often

in the clay soils of the Renosterveld in the west Cape and extends as far east as Humansdorp and Port Elizabeth. A much smaller species with similar attractive orange flowers is *Ornithogalum multifolium*. It has many grass-like leaves.

*Ornithogalum maculatum* is a striking deep orange species with black markings on the tips of the outer petals. It occurs in the drier areas of Namaqualand, the Boland and the western Karoo. *Ornithogalum pruinatum* from the drier northern Cape, has greyer leaves and long-lasting, white flowers. It is a good rockery subject. Another desert species is *Ornithogalum xanthochlorum* occurring near Ceres and Tanqua Karoo. Despite an extremely arid habitat, it's one of the largest species in the Western Cape.

A novelty species is *Ornithogalum longibracteatum*, commonly known the pregnant onion. It has many offsets that develop alongside the mature bulbs, eventually resulting in a mass of exposed bulbs crowded together in rock fissures and cracks. They have tall spikes of many small, greenish flowers and are

**ABOVE: *Ornithogalum longibracteatum* is commonly called a pregnant onion because it forms many bulbils around the mature bulbs above ground. It's found crowded into rock fissures and ledges on *krantz*es and cliffs, and it makes a novelty pot plant that thrives on overcrowding.**

**ABOVE LEFT: *Ornithogalum synanthifolium* is an almost evergreen east Cape species that has also proved outstanding as a cut flower and landscaping subject.**

popular pot plants, often filling a pot with attractive green bulbs that spill out and over the sides. Be warned, however, they spread very easily from seed and can become a weedy nuisance in gardens.

All *Ornithogalum* grow readily from seed. They mature rapidly to flowering size and are relatively pest and disease free. Advice on cultivation can be obtained from the booklet *Grow Bulbs* by Graham Duncan, part of the Kirstenbosch Gardening Series. The Western Cape species are fully covered in *The Color Encyclopedia of Cape Bulbs* by Manning, Goldblatt and Snijman.

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1. *Ornithogalum paludosum*, growing at 2 500m at the top of Naude's Nek Pass between Maclear and Rhodes in the Eastern Cape.

2. *Ornithogalum maculatum*, characterised by the black tips on its petals, is found in the drier areas of the Boland, Namaqualand and the Western Karoo.

3. The best-known chinchinchee, *Ornithogalum thyrsoides* is cultivated throughout the world as a cut flower for commercial use.

4 to 6. Three colour forms of *Ornithogalum dubium* – a very attractive and variable species.