

TRITONIOPSIS – the striking mountain pipes

The spectacular flowers of the many species of *Tritoniopsis* make a brave show in late summer at a time of the year when the Fynbos is rather drab. **Cameron McMaster** reports.



Tritoniopsis antholyza is one of the few species adapted to the shale-derived soils of Renosterveld. It has a wide distribution to as far east as Port Elizabeth.



The Table Mountain Beauty butterfly (*Aeropetes tulbaghia*) is an important pollinator of red flowers, including *Tritoniopsis*.

THE GENUS *TRITONIOPSIS* MUST NOT be confused with *Tritonias*. While the two genera may have similar sounding names and both are classified within the family Iridaceae, the plants in each group are quite different in both the appearance of the flowers and leaf structure. The name *Tritoniopsis* means

'The seeds are large and light-coloured, often with wings.'

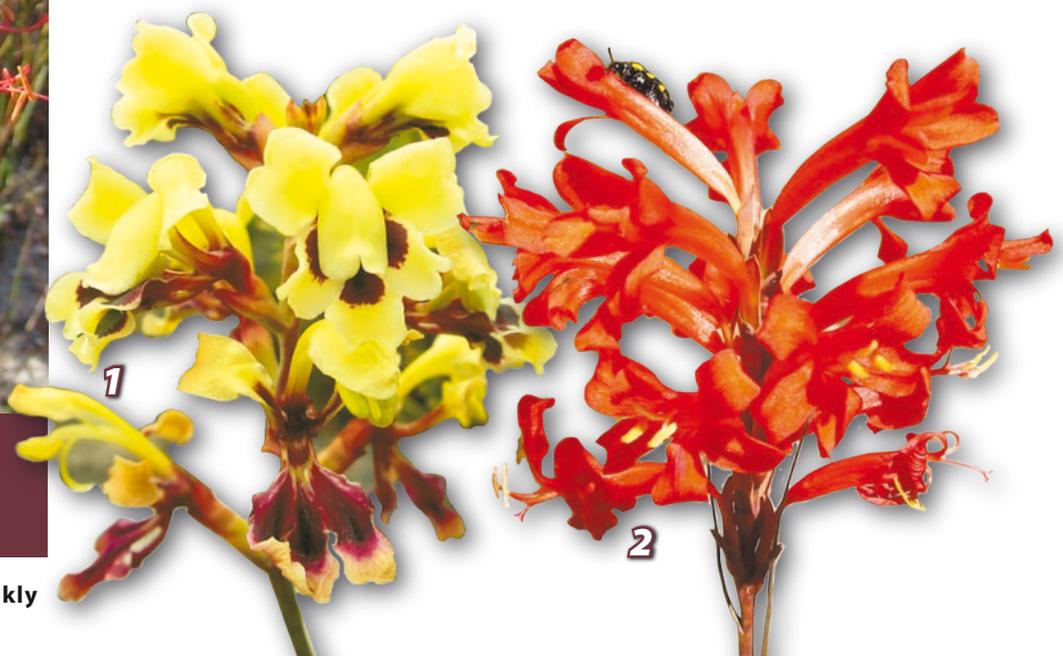
Tritonia-like, but it's difficult to understand why the genus was so named as it differs substantially from *Tritonias*. The common name chosen for this group, mountain pipes (*Bergpypie* in Afrikaans) is also rather inappropriate since the flowers are not all typically pipe-shaped. To avoid confusion I like to refer to them simply as *Tritoniopsis*.

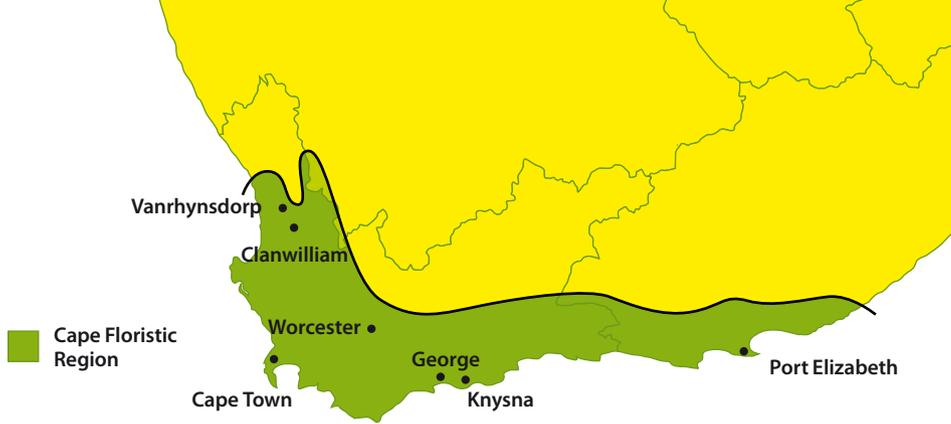
Tritoniopsis are generally hardy, robust deciduous or evergreen plants with deeply buried corms covered by tough fibrous tunics. In common with other Iridaceae the leaves are sword-shaped, fairly rigid with parallel veins, but lacking a definite midrib.

The striking flowers, which come in a wide variety of shapes and colours, are borne on spikes of up to 1m high in some species, and smaller species have flower spikes of not more than 40cm. Seeds develop in rather large, leathery and inflated seed capsules. The seeds are large, light-coloured and irregularly shaped, often with wings and so are adapted to wind distribution.

With one exception, *Tritoniopsis* occurs almost exclusively in the Cape Floral Region, from the Bokkeveld escarpment to Port Elizabeth. There are 24 species, nearly all of which are found in sandstone soils in Fynbos, generally preferring rocky situations where their corms are protected from digging animals like baboons, porcupines and moles.

In contrast to many Cape bulbs, most *Tritoniopsis* flower in summer at the height of the dry season. Many flower after their leaves have withered and dried, but some retain their leaves all year round. Their spectacular flowers make a brave show at a time of the year when the Fynbos is rather drab. My first encounter with *Tritoniopsis* was many years ago





when I visited the Van Staden's Pass Wild Flower Reserve near Port Elizabeth.

I photographed this gorgeous pink lily-like flower which I only later identified as an *Anapalina*, a genus now included in *Tritoniopsis*. With more experience of the group, I later established it was *Tritoniopsis antholyza*, a widespread species and one of only two species that extends as far east as the Eastern Cape.

Always on the lookout for more specimens I eventually came across *Tritoniopsis caffra*, a striking scarlet flower which as the name implies is the only species to extend into the summer rainfall region of the Eastern Cape. It's found in damp grassland, fynbos and forest verges extending along the coast up to East London and is common in the Tsitsikamma area.

The majority of species

However, it's the Western Cape mountains where the majority of the species are found. The arresting sight of the tall bright red species, *Tritoniopsis triticea* and *Tritoniopsis burchellii*, brighten the day for summer hikers in the Cape Mountains.

The smaller species with flowers of different colours are equally beautiful, especially when the intricate flowers are examined close up. The dainty, dark pink *Tritoniopsis lata* and the more robust reddish *Tritoniopsis pulchra* are two to look out for between the Hottentots Holland mountains and the Agulhas coast. There are a number of white and yellow hued species like *Tritoniopsis unguicularis*, *Tritoniopsis bicolor* and *Tritoniopsis parviflora*. The latter two are seldom-seen species that only flower shortly after a fire.

Despite being so attractive, *Tritoniopsis* are not generally available as garden subjects and, in common with many other plants adapted to the

nutrient-poor sandstone soils of the Cape, they are not easy to grow. I have been successful in flowering *Tritoniopsis caffra* in my garden. As it's adapted to heavier soils in the summer rainfall region, it's more tolerant of garden situations. It can easily be grown from seed, which is available from specialist seed merchants.

Looking out for these beautiful and fascinating plants will add another dimension to your botanical exploration. More information on *Tritoniopsis* can be obtained from the various Wild Flower Guides for the Cape Floral Region, and the genus is comprehensively dealt with in the *Colour Encyclopedia of Cape Bulbs* by Manning, Goldblatt and Snijman, published by Timber Press. – Cameron McMaster (cameron@haznet.co.za). |fw

1. Rarely seen, this *Tritoniopsis parviflora* was photographed after a fire on the mountain south of Napier. It is dependent on fire to flower.

2. *Tritoniopsis triticea*, a striking flower that brightens the dry summer landscape in Fynbos near Napier.

3. *Tritoniopsis caffra* is the only member of the group that occurs in the summer rainfall region as far east as East London. This specimen was photographed in the Tsitsikamma area.

4. *Tritoniopsis unguicularis* is a small dainty species that flowers before Christmas, from the Cape Peninsula to Elim.

5. *Tritoniopsis lata* may be seen flowering in March on the sandstone mountain slopes from Bain's Kloof to Hermanus.



- Some *Tritoniopsis* flower only after the leaves have withered.
- Most varieties are difficult to grow in gardens as they're adapted to poor soils.
- There are a number of red-, white- and yellow-hued species.

