

Fall, 2012



~Gardening with Bulbs~

Volume 11, Issue 4

The Bulb Garden

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Coral Gems: *Bessera elegans* and *Anomatheca laxa*

Erle Nickel

Erle is a gardening writer and photographer. He writes a weekly column for the San Francisco Chronicle and has contributed feature articles to the Chronicle, San Jose Mercury News, and Pacific Horticulture magazine.—Ed.

There are many wonderful qualities to flowering plants, each with their own charm. Be that the shape, texture, or feel

of its foliage or flowers, its architectural interest, its potential fragrance, or its contribution to a greater design scheme, flowering plants offer a multitude of appealing features to the dedicated or casual gardener. There's no doubt, however, that flower color plays a prominent role for many in choosing a plant. Nowhere is that more evident than in the famous monochromatic gardens, such as Sackville-West's all-white garden at Sissinghurst. While color preference—in some cases, obsession—is of course personal,

there are particular flower colors that have acquired a certain cachet. True blue flowers are high on many a gardener's list, as the long-standing, passionate quest to develop a true blue rose illustrates. Green flowers comprise a short list, as do black flowers. Gardeners also have "phases," where they are enchanted by a particular hue. Right now, for me, that color is coral.



Bessera elegans, photo by Erle Nickel.

Of course, there are a multitude of "corals"—those with pink tones, orange shades, or reddish hues. As the saying goes, you "know" coral when you see it. It so happens that two of my favorite bulbs fall into this grouping:

Bessera elegans and *Anomatheca laxa*.

Bessera elegans

There's no need to make a case for *Bessera*, as its common name Coral Drops attests. This showy, late-summer-
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Iris of Apulia

Angelo Porcelli

Angelo Porcelli lives in Apulia, in southern Italy. His main interest is in geophytes suitable for this typical mediterranean climate. Over the years he has gathered a wide collection of most of the Italian geophytes, several of which are little known, visiting many of them in their native habitat. He also grows South African species from the same mediterranean climate, as well as subtropical amaryllids of the genus *Crinum* and *Hippeastrum*. When he isn't enjoying his local flora, Angelo works as an engineer for a company operating in the renewable energy field.—Ed.

The Land of Apulia

Known as the “heel of Italy,” Apulia is located in the extreme southeastern tip of the Italian peninsula. It's positioned like a natural bridge projecting into the Ionian Sea, with about 800 km (500 miles) of coastline, making the flora of this region rich in biodiversity. Many species with Balkanic distribution find their westernmost limits in

Apulia, while a good number of endemic species are present. Terrestrial orchids are widely distributed throughout the region—according to some botanists, about 70 percent of all species present in the whole Mediterranean Basin, especially the genus *Ophrys*. Apulia is a flat country for the most

part, with no true mountains, except for the Gargano peninsula and even there they are of limited height. The region enjoys a typical mediterranean climate, with dry, hot summers and winter rainfalls. The temperature range is comparable to USDA Zone 9. Agriculture is well developed, especially olive trees, making Apulia the leading producer of olive oil in Europe. In this overview, I will write about the genus *Iris* with the main focus on the endemic species present, all belonging to the Bearded Group, that is, the Eupogon Section.

Iris pseudopumila

The first species is *Iris pseudopumila*, which is

spread from north to south throughout Apulia and is also common in Sicily. I find these two disjunct distributions rather curious. This is an unscented dwarf species, usually 20 cm (8 in.) tall, bearing only one stemless flower with a rather long floral tube that works as



a stem. The yellow form is usually more common than the violet one, and occasionally some intermediate combinations are found. Its classic habitats are the stony pastures with very shallow soils, since in more fertile



These photographs of *Iris pseudopumila* show the significant color variation within the species. Photos by Angelo Porcelli.

soils it is overwhelmed by grasses. Flowering time is very early, from late January in milder winters. It adapts well to cultivation, growing in nice, rounded, low clumps, and a rocky garden would be its natural place.

Iris bicapitata

The second species is more showy: *Iris bicapitata*,
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Irises of Apulia (cont'd)

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 an endemism of the Gargano peninsula. For a long time misunderstood and considered *I. chamaeiris* (= *I. lutescens*), which grows instead on the Tyrrhenian side of Italy, this species has been properly recognized after the work dated 1996 of prof.ssa Maria Antonietta Colasante, "Taxonomic note on some Italian Bearded Irises (*Iris relicta* Colas. nom. nov. and *Iris bicapitata* Colas. sp. nov." *Flora Mediter.* 6: 213–217).

The specific name means "two heads" since this species always carries two sweetly scented flowers atop a well-developed stalk of 30 to 40 cm (12 to 16 in.). The violet form is predominant. This species is reputed to be an ancient natu-

ral hybrid and shows great variability in color, ranging from white to yellow, including several bi-toned combinations of violet, purple, yellow, and white. The genus name *Iris* comes from ancient Greek meaning "rainbow," and this species is surely one that merits it! Curiously, the colored forms can be scentless or have a different scent than the white, and this is also a clear sign of its hybrid origin.

Iris bicapitata and *I. pseudopumila* share the same habitat on the

Gargano pastures, but they don't hybridize in spite of growing side by side in several sites (chromosome numbers are quite different). I have observed this during several years of exploration and it's even more odd to see uniform patches of one species fighting the other, not allowing any "intruder" to grow in the colony. A remarkable feature of *I. bicapitata* is the ability to rebloom in cultivation in the autumn, starting in October and continuing all winter now and again,



Iris bicapitata, left, and *Iris revoluta*, right. Photos by Angelo Porcelli.

like *I. unguicularis*, until the final sprint in March. This has been observed by people in different climates than mine in the United States, France, and Great Britain. I think this species will have great ornamental potential as it becomes more known and spread around.

Iris revoluta

The third species is probably the most intriguing of all. Thinking of the various habitats of *Iris* species, many

places come to mind where this widespread genus can be found—from rather arid areas to banks of rivers, from open sunny pastures to shaded woodlands. I guess no one can imagine an *Iris* species growing literally on the sea, but this is the case of *Iris revoluta*. This species is a punctiform endemism of a very small sandy atoll of just few hundred square meters, barely one meter above sea level, located in the middle of a seashore lagoon in the extreme south of Apulia.

The atoll is composed of sand originating from the accumulation of dead shellfish and thus has a high concentration of sea salt. The sand is covered with annual grasses, *Pancratium maritimum* and *Drimia maritima*, species usually

found in seashores habitats. *I. revoluta* is a tall species, up to 70 cm (28 in.), with a slim but branched stalk, bearing several dark violet-indigo scented flowers, with falls folded backward giving the specific name. This species was studied in the early 1970s and described as valid species by prof.ssa M. Colasante, but it remains a great mystery as to why it grows just there and also as to its ancestry, being vaguely related to *I.*

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Irises of Apulia (cont'd)

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germanica. In my trials of cultivation it seems to grow well in a normal garden soil, in spite of its peculiar natural habitat.

Other Irises of Apulia

Apart from the three bearded species mentioned above, additional species in other *Iris* groups grow in Apulia. A member of the Spuria Section known as *Iris collina* in Italian Flora is regarded usually as synonymous with *I. sintenisii*, but it seems that Italian populations differ from the Balkanic ones and further studies will give the final word. It is commonly thought that it could be recognized as a subspecies of *I. sintenisii*. This species is scentless. It secretes droplets of nectar



Iris collina, photo by Angelo Porcelli.

around the ovary, which is actively visited by ants. An elusive species to find in the wild, the leaves are almost indistinguishable from the grasses around, and its habitats are sparse woodlands. In cultivation it is less easy since it can't stand watering in summer—it will rot quickly. This is reasonable for a mediterranean species adapted to dry summer, even if this species is evergreen. Oddly enough, it flowers very late for a mediterranean species, early June. The common opinion is that this species has “shifted” slowly to this area from a more continental climate. I have distributed seeds on the BX under the name *Iris collina*, just to indicate the origin of this population.

Another remarkable species grows in the southern

tip of the region, *Iris unguicularis ssp. cretensis*. This is the only natural Italian population of this species. Southern Apulia is barely 100 km (62 miles) from the Ionian islands of Greece, where this subspecies is rather common, while the instances of *I. unguicularis* here and there in Italy always refer to the broad-leaf form of Northern Africa (*ssp. unguicularis*), escaped from cultivation as an ornamental. This species is rather well known in cultivation. Several selections are available, but my point of view is that *I. unguicularis ssp. cretensis* is better, having smaller leaves that don't hide the winter flowering.

Also present in Apulia are two common elements of the mediterranean flora, *Iris tuberosa* (*Hermodactylus tuberosus*) and *I. sisyrinchium* (*Moraea sisyrinchium*), while the discrete *I. foetidissima* is fairly recorded in woodland areas. Species favoring moist environments are scarcer. *I. pseudacorus* is found in the few fluvial areas present in the region, but I have not yet been able to locate *I. sibirica*, whose presence was reported in old works on Italian Flora.



~Gardening with Bulbs ~

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**Thanks again for your continued support of
the Pacific Bulb Society!**

Summer Bulb Storage

Mary Gastil, Leo Martin, Jane McGary, Arnold Trachtenberg, John Wickham, Dylan Hannon, and Mary Sue Ittner all contributed to this article, which evolved from postings on the forum in June of 2012.—Ed.

Mary Gastil, who gardens in Santa Barbara, California, started it all when she posed these questions to the PBS forum in June 2012:

How are winter-growing bulbs best stored in summer?

If they are left in the ground, is a mulch recommended?

“I think the ideal way to store winter-growing bulbs in containers is to store them undisturbed, in their soil in their containers, where they experience day to night variation in temperature and low average humidity. But, reality occasionally intervenes.”

— Leo Martin

Is it better to leave the dry leaves and stalks on the surface for insulation or is it better to clear those away?

A number of people from different climates in the United States responded immediately with lengthy discussions.

Leo Martin wrote from Phoenix, Arizona: I think the ideal way to store winter-growing bulbs in containers is to store them undisturbed, in their soil in their containers, where they experience day to night variation in temperature and low average humidity.

But, reality occasionally intervenes.

In my experience, bulbs surrounded by soil or sand will dry out less than bulbs in wood chips. I would not deliberately unpot my collection to store over summer in wood chips under any circumstances. If a container breaks during the summer I will repot right away into soil but not water until fall.

In your climate [Gastil’s Southern California coastal climate] you could store containers in a well-ventilated outdoor shed. Keep summer rain off most winter-growing bulbs. You may

learn the hard way which ones won’t tolerate it and which ones will. Rodent protection will be mandatory. Rodents are ingenious and fit through tiny openings.

First-year seedlings have a rough time the first summer. You might consider not repotting seedlings for three to four years and storing them dry in the house, where it’s cooler, the first summer.

Divide and repot winter-growing bulbs while dormant, as late in the summer as possible so they are dis-

turbed for as little time as possible before the next growing season. Repot large, tough bulbs early on and seedlings and small bulbs later in the summer if you are time constrained.

In the ground, summer mulch is great for many bulbs. It serves to keep soil temperatures down. But if the mulch retains water, it’s not a good idea. And some people say

“Regarding the [term] ‘baking’ ... this is a word you will find in British books, and it should be banned from the bulb literature. Few bulbs in nature ‘bake,’ because they are so far underground or are growing amid grasses or scrub.”

— Jane McGary

some bulbs do better with a hot baking in the summer. I’m not sure it’s true but I know some bulbs tolerate this baking and bloom well the following season.

Take off the dead top stuff. It serves no purpose and is a mess. Look for seeds before you toss it!

Jane McGary responded from Portland, Oregon: I live in a similar climate, and here is my experience. Replant or repot the bulbs immediate-

ly in fresh soil mix that is as dry as possible given your ingredients. Then return them to their normal place, which one hopes would be a plunge bed in the case of pots. You can allow some winter-growing bulbs to dry out completely in summer, but some (e.g., many *Narcissus* and most *Fritillaria*) do best with a little sprinkle of water (not a soak!) every few weeks to keep the soil just barely humid. I clear the dry leaves and stalks away once they can be pulled free of the bulbs with very little pressure—pulling them off earlier may pull up the bulbs or damage them. You can also cut off flowering stalks close to the ground if the sight of them annoys you. I never used to mulch material in pots, and now that I have everything in raised beds, I use a pea gravel mulch.

Regarding the “baking” that Leo mentioned, this is a word you will find in British books, and it should be banned from the bulb literature. Few bulbs in nature “bake,” because they are so far underground or are growing amid grasses or scrub.

I avoid using bark or shavings with summer-dormant bulbs on the theory (intuitive but not by any

means proven) that the organisms that decompose the wood products also attack the tunics (nonliving tissue) of bulbs that have tunics. I have seen mycelia on bulb tunics that have been in soil including bark. I have always mixed my own potting soil rather than buying it, because it’s very hard to find bark-free potting soil in this area (Pacific Northwest). Now my bulbs are all growing freely in
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Summer Bulb Storage (cont'd)

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pure sharp sand over a layer of clay and compost, and they seem to like it. However, you should never layer soil in pots; it will cause problems with watering, as detailed in the literature on growing alpines in pots.

Commercial growers do use wood shavings (pine, mostly, I think) to store certain kinds of bulbs and also to pack them for shipping, but remember that they (at least the big firms) have temperature- and humidity-controlled facilities for bulb storage. There is no advantage to the bulbs in being stored this way, except to protect them from summer rainfall in areas where that occurs.

When I was selling surplus bulbs, I kept them in a cool, dim room in paper bags. I put some barely moist vermiculite around those that have no tunics (e.g., *Fritillaria*) or those that make root growth very early (e.g., some *Narcissus* species). They held well for the six weeks I had them out of the ground.

Well, I am not an expert at the level of a commercial grower, but these techniques have worked well for me for twenty years.

Arnold Trachtenberg wrote: The answers to your questions would depend on the bulbs and location. I'm in Northern New Jersey and I overwinter dahlias and aloccasias in the basement where it stays cool and dark. All my South African bulbs that are winter-growers go to the basement as well. The greenhouse gets much too hot during summers, reaching 100°F (38°C) to 110° F at times. Best to try and duplicate their native growing conditions.

John Wickham checked in from Los Angeles: I don't have a shed or garage to store my potted winter-growing bulbs, and it's been an annual problem for me. This year, I got a bunch of cinder block and some fencing material and built an ad hoc storage block in a deeply shaded corner of my yard. It's coolish, fully shaded, and the pots aren't nested, but resting on a shelf.

I've always stored them outside in this deeply shaded area, and they come back each year. The main problem is protecting from critters that dig in the pots for various reasons. This year, I've got some hardware cloth frames over the top level and that seems to be handling the problem. [In September John reported “. . . the friendly—and hungry—neighborhood mice dug into the most protected pots and ate everything around.”]

I've learned, though, that certain species will start growing mid-August without any water to encourage them. So it's important to watch.

Dylan Hannon from Monrovia, also in Southern California, contributed this: I agree wholeheartedly with Leo about storing bulbs undisturbed in the soil. Unless there is reason for inspection—suspected pests, disease, propagation (division) needs, etc.—then leave them be until late summer or fall. I once unpotted all my lachenalias and put them in packets, shaded and away from heat, only to find that by planting time root mealy had spread through most of them—which would not have been so easy for them if they had stayed in their protective soil mantle.

While I generally keep everything—a wide range of winter geophytes—perfectly dry over our warm dry SoCal summers, with overhead shading, what Jane said about some of these plants needing a little off-season splash of water is very true. Usually such plants will give notice that they need or enjoy water while resting by holding onto some green leaves, but this is not always true. Bulbs with perennial roots like most amaryllids presumably benefit more from such sprinkling than those that lose their roots entirely each season—many irids, oxalis, hyacinths, and so on. Geographic range provides a hint: many East Cape and Karoo bulbs are essentially winter-growing (as with *Haworthia*, some mesembs, etc.), but are subject to significant summer rains that they need to be healthy and strong.

What Jane stressed about sprinkling rather than drenching is very important—the idea is to moderate

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“Commercial growers do use wood shavings (pine, mostly, I think) to store certain kinds of bulbs ... but remember that they ... have temperature- and humidity-controlled facilities for bulb storage. There is no advantage to the bulbs in being stored this way, except to protect them from summer rainfall.”

— Jane McGary

Summer Bulb Storage (cont'd)

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soil conditions a little (contributing moisture and coolness) and not give so much water that roots are stimulated.

Virtually all my repotting is done at season's beginning (October or so) or during growth. I find that it is not good to repot a plant and then leave the soil dry and loose; the soil needs to be "congealed" so that particles interlock and insulate roots and begin to attain structural integrity. Dry soil left to dry further can become hydrophobic and require rainfall or soaking from below to become thoroughly moistened again. Dry, unwatered soil also provides access to drying air and pests like root mealy. [For more on this subject, see Hannon, Dylan P. Caring for dormant tuberous aroids. *Aroideana* 35: 144-148.]

Mary Sue Ittner chimed in: There seem to be some bulbs that need a period of warm temperatures in the summer to bloom well. This may be where the idea of baking came from. Living in northern coastal California I can't always provide those temperatures, day or night. My greenhouse does get warmer at least during the day as does upstairs in my house. So I store some things in those places for the summer. I've been having much more success with *Nerine sarniensis* hybrids since they got relocated to the greenhouse year round with occasional water in summer. I have great luck with summer-rainfall *Haemanthus* and some *Cyrtanthus* species that live in the greenhouse, but poor results with a lot of winter-rainfall South African amaryllids that are not in the greenhouse and I'm

Board Meeting, July 29, 2012

All board members were present (via telephone conference) except Pamela Slate, who was excused.

Jane McGary reported that we currently have 291 members, with some increase of late in our foreign members. The membership booklet needs to go out with the winter edition of *The Bulb Garden*.

John Wickham continues to work on the by-laws in order to prepare us for incorporation. The board decided that we should eliminate the executive council from the by-laws; for a smaller group like ours, it was deemed by the group that such a council was unnecessary. We continue to work to clarify the *process* of our operations in the by-laws; this is especially needed in terms of our elections.

PBS members may have noted the new logo on the wiki or on the front cover of this newsletter. Say thanks to Nhu Nguyen, who designed it (and a black and white version) so that we can continue to promote our group. Nhu is also working to establish a second signator on

wondering if it is just too cool for them in summer.

I always unpot my *Leucocoryne* and store them in paper bags upstairs as they don't bloom if moved to the shade and kept in pots. It's just not warm enough. And for years there were a number of the beautiful *Ornithogalum dubium* hybrids that I stored dry upstairs and didn't plant again until I saw signs of growth. And I always unpot my *Tulipa* bulbs (when large enough) and store them in paper bags as well and repot them in December after prechilling them for four to six weeks first. Many of the *Tulipa* varieties I have grown have been coming back well for twenty-five years treated this way. And I unpot my *Oxalis* bulbs and store them in brown bags and send the excess to the BX. I try to get them repotted by August, but if I run out of time I just pot the ones that are already growing first and it doesn't seem to matter. Then when I do pot them up I can water them right away and not have to struggle with the water running around the sides of the pots in the too dry potting material leaving the pots still dry. The birds are as big a problem for me as rodents so I do sometimes try to cover the pots with wire, which hasn't been totally successful.

So I'd echo Arnold and say the answer probably is that it depends on your climate and what you are growing. Fortunately, since I'm now on the other side of growing more, if something doesn't make it in my conditions, it just solves the dilemma of what to eliminate.



our Fidelity account.

Arnold provided a P&L statement and fielded questions regarding our investment. We currently have our money divided between cash, a money market account, and a mutual fund ("Fidelity 4-in-1 Index"). The board also voted (via email on 7-1-12) to provide Dell Sherk with a PayPal debit card to pay for postal and any other expenses related to his duties as PBS BX/SX Director. Arnold has also been busy finishing up the group sale of *Grow Bulbs* and gently nudging those whose BX accounts are delinquent

BX 317 was one of the largest ever with more than 55 separate individuals ordering. Keep those donations coming!

The board revisited the idea of publishing *TBG* online. Though it might reduce printing costs, and would definitely make us "greener," some of our members are not online. For now, we decided to continue as-is.



On the Bookshelf

Emilie Pulver

Emily is a theological librarian at work and an urban botanist at play. She lives on the third floor of an older apartment building and grows most of her plants under lights. Some of her many interests are carnivorous plants, ant plants, succulent bulbs mostly from South Africa, aroids, aquarium plants, and scented geraniums. She says, "Also I collect books, mostly botanical rather than horticultural since the hort books do not help me on the third floor."

Glistening carnivores: the sticky-leaved insect-eating plants. By Stewart McPherson. Poole, Dorset, England: Redfern Natural History Productions, 2009. 388 p., 276 color ill. Glossary, bibliography.

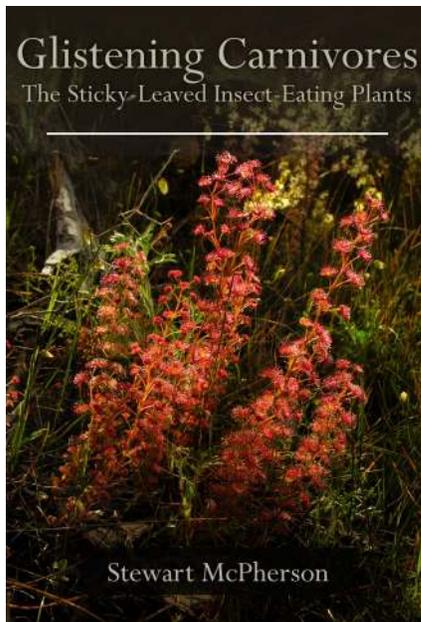
When I first heard of Stewart McPherson and his publishing company, Redfern Natural History Productions (www.redfermnaturalhistory.com), I was skeptical; would his titles be little more than coffee table books full of gorgeous pictures of carnivorous plants? However, while browsing among current issues of botanical journals in a science library, I came across a favorable review of his then recently published two-volume work on *Nepenthes*, in which the author of the review commended McPherson for collecting in one place a voluminous amount of information about these tropical pitcher plants, and I decided to look into McPherson's books on the various families of carnivorous plants and their habitats.

Glistening Carnivores is McPherson's overview of the seven genera of carnivorous plants that use adhesive traps to capture prey: *Byblis*, *Drosera*, *Pinguicula*, *Ibicella*, *Roridula*, and the monotypic *Drosophyllum lusitanicum* and *Triphyophyllum peltatum*. *Drosera* is the largest genus, found on every continent except Antarctica and in a wide range of habitats. Among the different groups of *Drosera*, the so-called tuberous drosera would claim the interest of the members of the Pacific Bulb Society.

McPherson opens with a botanical history of the sticky-leaved plants, especially focusing on Charles Darwin's studies of and experiments on *Drosera rotundifolia*, which grows in British wetlands. He continues with an overview of all seven genera, and includes a complete list of all species known at the date

of publication. Chapters on the ecology and biology of these sticky plants follow: a chapter on the different trapping mechanisms employed by the various genera; a chapter on the evolution of these plants; and a chapter on the fascinating mutualistic arthropods that inhabit some of these species. McPherson then devotes a chapter to each genus, concluding with a chapter on habitat loss and the threat of extinction and a brief chapter on cultivation, followed by a glossary and an ample bibliography. Throughout the book, McPherson calls upon a number of European botanists who present brief reports of their various recent discoveries about aspects of these plants.

The chapter on the genus *Drosera* is the longest at more than one hundred pages, as this is the largest and most diverse of all the sticky-leaved carnivorous plants. McPherson surveys the six subgroups of *Drosera* with their widely different ecologies.



The tuberous drosera are found in Australia, New Zealand, and parts of Southeast Asia, in areas with an annual pattern of extreme summer drought. They evolved tubers to store water and nutrients for a summer dormancy. Their pattern of growth revolves around a wet season and a dry season. In Australia the wet season arrives with the rains from May through September, followed by a hot dry period. Most of the Australian tuberous *Drosera* begin growth between April and May and can reach their maximum size and flower by late August to October so that seeds are produced before the worst of the drought returns. Their deeply buried tubers

also protect these species of *Drosera* from the effects of the frequent Australian wild fires in the marginal and seasonably dry areas where the vegetation is highly flammable.

Around forty-eight species of tuberous drosera are recognized. They are roughly divided into three classes that reflect the numerous microhabitats where they are found: rosette tuberous drosera, which produce broad flat leaves arranged in a rosette on the ground; upright scrambling drosera, which grow into some of the largest plants of the genus on tall self-supporting or climbing stems; and the stolonifera complex, which produce prostrate, creeping, or erect stems with fanlike

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On the Bookshelf (cont'd)

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leaves. McPherson describes examples of each of these three classes; however, the specific classification of these species is still disputed among specialists. Most of the tuberous drosera produce pea-sized tubers 25 to 50 cm (10 to 20 inches) under the ground, which regrow a long vertical shoot each year to the surface of the ground and then produce the carnivorous leaves. Here and throughout the book, McPherson's discussion is accompanied by his magnificent



photos of these drosera in habitat. (Almost all the photographs are by the author.)

Having read about their fascinating natural history and feasted on the dramatic photographs, I imagine that some PBSers will want to know about the cultivation of and sources

for these drosera. McPherson offers no specific horticultural information, but wisely guides the reader to the various national and international carnivorous plant societies; I can only suggest the same. Growing tuberous drosera and nurturing them through their required dormancy is a difficult task and these plants are not widely available except at certain times of the year



from certain specialist nurseries or for trade by *Drosera* enthusiasts. I would recommend joining the International Carnivorous Plant Society (www.carnivorousplants.org). Here you can meet other interested growers through the journal, forum, and the list serve. Members share seeds as part of the members-only benefits and occasionally seeds of tuberous drosera are available. They are notoriously difficult to germinate and may need fire pots or treatments with gibberellic acid. Seeds may also be available from California Carnivores, the oldest and one of the most respected carnivorous plant nurseries, where you can preorder drosera tubers from Australia in February for delivery from March

to April. However, these tubers will be difficult to acclimate as they resent changing hemispheres from south to north. For many, it may be enough to have McPherson transport you to the ends of the earth in search of these fascinating plants in habitat.



Treasurer's Report, Third Quarter 2012

BALANCE 7/1/2012	\$21,533.83
U.S. Members	\$180.00
Overseas Members	\$250.00
BX Receipts	\$3,285.85
Contributions	\$34.00
Investment Results	\$559.44
TOTAL INCOME	\$4,309.29
BX/SX Expense	(\$988.82)
Board Conference Call	(\$68.96)
Total Publications	(\$2,200.00)
PayPal Expense	(\$168.94)
Supplies	(\$0)
Postage	(\$745.24)
TOTAL EXPENSES	(\$4,171.96)
BALANCE 6/30/2012	\$21,671.16

Coral Gems: *Bessera elegans* and *Anomatheca laxa* (cont'd)

(continued from page one)

blooming, deciduous corm hails from southwestern Mexico but has found its way into the American market in recent years. It's still not widely known, giving some of us who spread the word a bit of additional pleasure. Like a newly discovered fine wine, once you've seen *Bessera* bloom, it will leave an indelible mark and

make the year's wait until the next flowering full of anticipation. In early summer it sends up a multitude of wiry stems that eventually sprout umbels of pendent, inch-and-a-half, umbrella-like flowers. Each umbel can produce up to nine flowers, making this

modest-sized bulb a fairly prolific bloomer. Each of the six orangey-coral petals showcases white interiors, veined and bordered with the same exterior color. Green anthers and a purple style add further interest to the flower. Some have compared these dainty wonders to coral snowdrops.

Bessera is part of the family Asparagaceae, subfamily Brodiaeoidae. It was initially included in the Liliaceae, but at the end of the twentieth century it became apparent that the heterogeneous Liliaceae was several times polyphyletic and that the brodiaea family was closer to *Asparagus* than to *Allium* or *Amaryllis*. The family Themidaceae was resurrected, appearing in an article in *Taxon* in 1996. The name was based on the now-defunct genus *Themis*, which contained only one species—*Themis ixioides*. Its name was changed to *Brodiaea ixioides* by Sereno Watson in 1879, then to *Triteleia ixioides* by Edward Lee Greene in 1886. The *Bessera* genus is named for Austrian and Russian botanist Wilibald Swibert Jo-



If you don't look carefully, you might miss the beautiful striae of *Bessera elegans*! Photos by Erle Nickel.

seph Gottlieb von Besser (1784–1842).

Bessera elegans can be a bit temperamental as it needs to be kept dry while winter-dormant. It is hardy down to freezing, which means it is advisable to grow it in a pot so that in cold climates it can be brought inside during the winter. In the spring, it waits for soil temperatures to rise before sprouting new shoots. This trigger results in a range of appearance, late spring in milder microclimates and early summer in colder ones. It appreciates fertile fast-draining soil and full sun. These easily created conditions seem a small trouble to enjoy the stunning, hummingbird-pollinated flowers.



Anomatheca laxa

The descriptive “charming” is overused, but it certainly does apply to the little-known member of the iris (Iridaceae) family, *Anomatheca laxa*. Hon-

estly, it's a bit puzzling to me why this cormous perennial hailing from the grasslands of Central and South Africa isn't better known. Closely related to the *Freesia* genus, to the point it's sometimes called “false freesia,” it's a vigorous bulb that, like its cousin, will naturalize in your garden. It features the same flat, broadly lance-shaped midgreen leaves as *Freesia* and can vary in height between four and twelve inches. New shoots pop up in midspring, flushed out by moisture and warming temperatures. Racemes of upward-facing, six-tepaled, starry, trumpet-shaped flowers appear in late spring and can continue until midsummer. The trick is trying to describe the color of the one-inch blooms. Reddish-coral? Coral with reddish-pink tones? It definitely borrows more from the reds, as opposed to the orange hues of *Bessera*. The flowers are also noteworthy for the

(continued to next page)

Coral Gems: *Bessera elegans* and *Anomatheca laxa* (cont'd)

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dark red splotches at the bases of the lower three tepals.

Besides the fabulous color, *Anomatheca laxa* has two things going for it. First, it is super easy to grow and readily naturalizes in your garden. I started with a single four-inch potted plant in a raised bed and over the years it has



These photos show the variation in the beautiful coral color of *Anomatheca laxa*. Above: photo by Mary Sue Ittner; right: photo by Erle Nickel.

colonized the entire six-by-six-foot bed. Secondly, this bulb likes some shade, making it perfect for a woodland garden. Mine gets filtered morning sun under the canopy of an apple tree. This bulb is quite adaptable; it will make itself at home even with a bit more sun or complete shade.

You don't need to think long and hard about why you'd want to add this guy to your garden. It's the color of the flowers. Its presence is somewhat unassuming—until it flowers. Then you're treated to a splendiferous show of that one-of-a-kind color over a two-month stretch.

Anomatheca laxa might well be a wanted felon for all the aliases it has. It is synonymous with and formerly known as *Anomatheca cruenta*, *Lapeirousia laxa*, *Lapeirousia cruenta*, and *Freesia laxa*. It is also sometimes known as "scarlet freesia." This species contains a white-flowering variety (*A. laxa* var. *alba*), whose pure white flowers contain a central coral-red blotch. Speaking of this plant's former *Lapeirousia* designation, I can't avoid mentioning another species in this genus, *L. oreogena*. Featuring saturated purple petals, set off with dramatic black and white pinwheel markings, this flower more than makes up for its diminutive size with an impressive wow factor.

Anomatheca laxa is a tough customer. If it gets typical mediterranean climate dry summer and fall weather, it simply goes dormant and waits for winter rains to spark renewed growth. It is hardy down to at least 30°F (-1°C), if not more. For those getting a serious freeze, the corms can be dug up and stored in a cool dry place for the winter. Mist occasionally so the corms don't completely dry out. Though, like many South African bulbs, *Anomatheca* appreciates a dry off season, I have mine planted where they get some summer and fall moisture and that hasn't



stopped them from naturalizing. Like their *Freesia* cousins, they are natural overachievers.

Opposites attract

So, we have two bulbs that at first glance seem like true opposites. One from the hot climate of Mexico that likes sun and a dry off season and whose flowers are showy and one-of-a-kind (*Bessera*). And another from the mediterranean grasslands of South Africa that is super easy to grow, naturalizes, and whose flower structure is simple and immediately recognizable (*Anomatheca*). And yet, they do share that one quality in my mind—an exquisite though slightly different shade of coral. Coral, that hard-to-define but oh-so-tantalizing hue that has driven gardeners mad for centuries.



Gardening with Bulbs



If Erle Nickel's photo of *Bessera elegans* isn't enough to convince you, his article will explain why these "coral gems" have such a special place in his heart (and his garden)!

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The Bulb Garden © 2012

The Bulb Garden is the newsletter of the Pacific Bulb Society (PBS). It is published, if enough articles are submitted, around the third week of each quarter and is available to PBS members. This newsletter provides gardening or bulb related articles, news of interest to members, and announcements of the PBS organization.

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