

The Southern African Bulb Group

Newsletter No. 3

Spring 2005



The Southern African Bulb Group was initiated by a group of enthusiasts on April 4th 2004. The objective of the group is to further the understanding of the cultivation of Southern African bulbs, where 'bulbs' is used in the broad sense to encompass bulb-, corm- and tuber- possessing Southern African plants, including 'dicots' such as Oxalis. In the first instance the group will be run on an informal basis, with an initial subscription of £5 invited from participants.

Committee: Robin Attrill (Membership secretary and Newsletter editor), Margaret Corina (Treasurer), Stefan Rau and Terry Smale

Editorial

This third issue of the newsletter contains details of the next meeting of the group to be held at Rupert Bowlby's Nursery on April 9th 2005, an article on *Polyxena* by Terry Smale, information on an AGS meeting of potential interest to the group, and an updated list of suppliers of seed and bulbs/corms of Southern African geophytes.

As I have previously stated the group welcomes articles, and suggestions, for inclusion in future newsletters. Contributions (handwritten, typewritten and electronic are acceptable!) should be sent to the newsletter editor at 17 Waterhouse Moor, Harlow, Essex, CM18 6BA (Email Robin@rpattrill.freemove.co.uk) Publication of the next issue is scheduled for June 2005.

Group visit to Rupert Bowlby - Saturday 9th April 2005

The spring meeting this year is planned for Saturday 9th April, 2005 at Rupert Bowlby's nursery. It was originally intended that Alan Horstmann of Rust-en-Vrede Nursery would be present, and would present a lecturer but circumstances have, unfortunately, not permitted this to be the case. Instead we are fortunate that Terry Smale has very kindly agreed to step in at very short notice and will present a talk on Southern African Amaryllids.

The plan for the day is:-

11.00 a.m. Meet for coffee/biscuits, plant sales and viewing members' plants and the nursery. It is hoped that some of the more-informed members present will be able to lead discussions on specific genera on display.

12.30 p.m. Lunch/picnic in the packing shed and polytunnel. An absolute highlight of the day (don't forget to bring some chairs/seats).

14.00 p.m. Lecture in nearby St. Andrew's Church, Gatton (about a quarter of a mile away).

In the polytunnel, there will be space to show and sell plants. The selling will be done in a semi-communal way. Anybody in AGS sales will know what a double label system is: one label for plant name, collection number, etc. and one label with the name of the seller plus cost of plant. Please would everybody stick to this, as it should avoid the problems we had at the last meeting. Any monies unclaimed go to the group and donations from sellers are welcome. And please, would everybody take their plants back home again after the meeting; thank you.

In keeping with the past it would help with organisation to know numbers of people attending in advance. So please contact Rupert Bowlby, if possible, by the previous weekend. His address is Rupert Bowlby, Cornerstones, Gatton Park, Reigate, Surrey, RH2 0TA; E-mail rupert.bowlby@care4free.net or phone 01737 642221. Instructions for finding the nursery are as follows:-

From Junction 8 of the M25, turn south on the A217 towards Reigate. Keep to the left-hand lane and after 120 yards go left down Gatton Bottom, signed to Merstham. After one mile, turn right into Rocky Lane by the sign to Royal Albert and Alexandra School. Keep in Rocky Lane and after 2 bends you will see a sign on the left to the Bulb Nursery. After turning left by the sign, keep right down the track which is full of potholes. Look out for a car park sign.

Finally, another plea for you to bring along plants of interest on the day to show the rest of the group. We all want to see what is being grown in England; the good, the ailing and the curios are all very welcome, and it is a time when much should be in flower.

Notice of Alpine Garden Society East Anglian Conference – Global Alpines - Saturday 23rd April 2005

Members may be interested in attending the above meeting, to be held at Linton Village College, near Cambridge. Of particular interest is the fact that one of the speakers is the Kirstenbosch bulb specialist, Graham Duncan. At the time of going to press Grahams lecture title was not confirmed, (highveld bulbs has been suggested), but the subject matter will doubtless be of interest to many in the group. Attendance for the day costs £17.50 which covers a total of four lectures, and those interested should contact Doug Joyce, tel 01371 810 524, for further details.

Further Notes on *Polyxena*

by Terry Smale

About five years ago, I produced some notes on the genus *Polyxena* for publication in *The Alpine Gardener* (Smale, 2002). Since that time, there have been further developments both in the literature and in my greenhouse. It is one of my favourite bulbous genera; the plants are compact and they flower in late autumn when there are not many other plants of interest. It therefore comes as a shock to learn from Robin Attrill that we might be losing the genus in a merger with *Lachenalia* (Manning *et al*, 2004). Most taxonomic jiggery-pokery these days tends to have its origins in DNA sequence data and although I have not yet seen it, I suspect this paper is no exception. However, when one compares plants of *Lachenalia pusilla* and *barkeriana* with *Polyxena* species, the gross similarities are very obvious.

There are two species that have two broad ovate leaves: *P. ensifolia* and *P. pygmaea*. Since I wrote the earlier notes, it appears that there is acceptance for dividing the first of these species into *P. ensifolia* var. *ensifolia* and *P. ensifolia* var. *maughanii*. The *Color Encyclopedia of Cape Bulbs* takes things even further and recognises them as separate species. The variety *maughanii* has the stamens included within the flower tube and the material that I have grown tends to be very compact. In cultivation, the leaves often tend to be rather upright at flowering time and somewhat hide the flowers. Because the flowers are in contact with the leaves, this variety is very prone to botrytis on dead flowers infecting the leaves with disastrous results. The stamens of variety *ensifolia* are well exerted from the flower tube and with me, the pedicels (flower stalks) tend to be longer than in the other variety. This results in the flowers being carried clear of the leaves, thus producing a much more attractive plant that is not so prone to botrytis.

When I wrote the *Alpine Gardener* article, I thought that it was very easy to distinguish *P. ensifolia* from *P. pygmaea*. The latter tends to have very long flower tubes, petals coiled backwards and light purple flowers. Since then I have flowered a form of *P. ensifolia* var. *ensifolia* that originates from Vanrhynspas and this has the very long tubes of *P.*

pygmaea, but white flowers and petals that do not recurve quite so much as in *P. pygmaea*, so I now wonder if they really are distinct entities.

Now onto the species which have several narrow leaves to each bulb. *Polyxena longituba* continues to appear on show benches and nursery lists labelled as *P. ensifolia*. Obviously very few people read my article which showed *P. longituba* to be the correct name for the plants commonly grown in UK alpine houses for the last 40 years. My theory that our stocks originated from the collection made by Harry Hall at Voelfontein in the 1960s has been vindicated by a pan exhibited by Joy Bishop, which had a label with Hall's collecting number on it. I have flowered the collection from the recently-discovered colony near the top of the Komsberg Pass and this is slightly more variable in flower colour than the Hall material. In particular, some plants are somewhat more mauve-blue than the old material.

Polyxena paucifolia has now reached flowering size in my greenhouse and it has proved to be a much smaller and more delicate plant than the closely related *P. corymbosa*; one needs quite a few bulbs to make a good display. All of the narrow-leafed species tend to offset freely in contrast to the broad leafed species. Thus, all of my stock of *P. corymbosa* is of a single clone and I will never need to sow *P. paucifolia* again.

The form of a corymb is a central stem (peduncle) with branches from the side that are long at the bottom and short at the top, such that the flowers appear as a fairly flat cluster. This is how *P. corymbosa* gets its name and these flat-topped clusters are illustrated on page 161 of my Alpine Gardener article. Thus it came as some surprise to see the illustration of *P. "corymbosa"* on page 331 of the Color Encyclopedia. This shows the flowers in a spike, i.e. arranged along the peduncle in the manner of a classic *Lachenalia* inflorescence. In discussion with Gordon Summerfield, I have determined that the page 331 photo is in fact of the recently-recognised *P. brevifolia* from Gordon's Bay. The name is not new; it dates back to 1812, but has hitherto been lumped with *P. corymbosa*. Seed of *P. brevifolia* is available, but most curiously I have had two attempts at germinating it and failed. Therefore I have resorted to getting seedling bulbs from Gordon and am now re-establishing them to our seasons.

References

Smale, T.C. (2002). *Polyxena longituba*, *The Alpine Gardener*, **70**: 160-165.

Manning, J.C., Goldblatt, P. & Fay, M.F. (2004). A revised generic synopsis of Hyacinthaceae in sub-Saharan Africa, including new combinations and the new tribe Pseudoprosperaeae, *Edinburgh J. Bot.* **60**(3): 533-568.

Updated list of Suppliers of Southern African Bulbs

An updated list of sources is given below. Once again I would ask that if you have experience of other reliable sources please send details for inclusion in a future expanded list.

UK based suppliers

- **Jim & Jenny Archibald** (‘Bryn Collen, Ffostrasol, Llandysul, SA44 5SB, Wales, UK)
(Seed of selected species. catalogue online at <http://www.jjaseeds.com/>)
- **Rupert Bowlby** (The Bulb Nursery, Gatton, Reigate, Surrey, RH2 0TA)
Bulbs &corms of selected species. Catalogue available on request from Rupert at Rupert.Bowlby@care4free.net . Website <http://www.rupert.bowlby.care4free.net/>
- **Great Western Gladiolus** Email: clutton.glads@btinternet.com
Listing includes a number of South African taxa.
- **Monocot Nursery** (St Michaels, Littleton, Somerton, Somerset, TA11 6NT, UK)
(Seed and bulbs of selected species)
- **Terry Smale** (28 St. Leonards Rd, Epsom Downs, Surrey, KT18 5RH, UK)
An interesting selection of Southern African taxa offered by a member of this group - Catalog online at <http://www.smale1.demon.co.uk/index.htm>

South African suppliers

- **Silverhill Seeds** (PO Box 53108, Kenilworth, 7745, Cape Town, RSA)
(Extensive range of seed, catalogue online at www.silverhillseeds.co.za Please note that the paper catalogue has been continued, the nursery is suspending sales during the mid winter months, and the focus of the listings will apparently in future place more emphasis on Western Cape taxa)
- **Rust-en-Vrede Nursery** (PO Box 753, Brackenfell, 7561, RSA)
(A very good list of seed and corms)
- **Gordon Summerfield** (PO Box 5150, Helderberg, Somerset West, 7135, RSA)
(A fine list of seed and corms, many with provenance data)
- **African Bulbs** (P.O. Box 26, Napier 7270, RSA)
(Catalogue of selected Eastern Cape and Western Cape bulbs and seeds online at www.africanbulbs.com/ Formerly known as The Croft Wild Bulb Nursery)

In addition to the above a number of society seed distribution schemes, including those of the International Bulb Society, the Indigenous Bulb Association of South Africa, the Alpine Garden Society and the North American Rock Garden Society can be productive sources of material although misidentification is a frequent problem.

A formerly useful source, the Botanical Society of South Africa, has recently withdrawn seed distribution to overseas members. Requests to the society to explain the rationale for this have gone unanswered. Purchasing from the Kirstenbosch seed list is still possible but the range of species available is limited