The Southern African Bulb Group

Newsletter No. 22 -- June, 2012

From the Editor **David Victor**

What a strange weather year it has turned out to be so far. When I wrote the last newsletter, in January, I mentioned the tap of snow on the window, after an autumn that seemed to last forever. Well, whilst it did turn cold for a while, come March and we had an extended period of summer weather. This was then followed by another extended period of early spring weather which lasted until late May. This then followed by an almost unbearable hot period with very high humidity. The result for me has been plants flowering in a weird sequence, with some very early, others very late. Let's hope that it all settles down before long.

As many of you will know, Audrey Cain recently was not too well earlier this year and had to miss the Spring meeting. A little later on, she underwent a very serious operation and all of us were holding our breath for a while. Well, I'm very pleased to be able to tell you all that the operation was a complete success and she has recovered wonderfully well: indeed, she is very much herself again. She has asked me to thank all of you on her behalf for your good wishes and the card and to tell you that she aims to be back on top form for the Autumn meeting (see notice below).

A date for the Spring 2013 meeting has not yet been set in concrete, as we are trying to avoid clashes with other groups. Currently, we are holding two dates open with Badger Farm, the 10th and the 31st of March: We understand that the Frit Group meeting and the Lachenalia day are likely to be on the intervening week-ends. So, please try to keep those dates open in your diaries and we will let you know in due course.

This newsletter is a little earlier that I would normally plan as I have been asked to circulate details of a local get-together being organised by our Member, John Sanders, at his home in Nottinghamshire – see details below. If any other Members wish to use this newsletter to offer any similar events, just let me know.

Those of you interested in *Lachenalia* will be pleased to know that Graham Duncan's new book on the subject will be available soon. Entitled "The Genus Lachenalia – A Botanical Magazine Monograph it is expected to be published by Kew Publishing in June this year. They describe it as:

> "This is the first complete and illustrated monograph of the genus *Lachenalia*, a horticulturally important and botanically diverse plant group. *Lachenalia* ranks with *Gladiolus* as one of the two most popular genera of South African bulbous plants worldwide, and next to *Ornithogalum* is the second-largest member of the family *Hyacinthaceae* in southern Africa.
>
> All species are described, classified and illustrated, with detailed text on history, morphology, phylogeny, phytogeography, pollination biology, cultivation and propagation. This book includes many highly attractive species which have never been illustrated in colour before, with 11 new taxa, ten of which are new species.
>
> Ca. 650 pages. 300+ photos. 135 maps. Hardback"

The quoted price is £120 from Kewbooks.com, the publishing are of RBG Kew.

Alina Hughes was in touch with me to say that she had been discussing swapping plants with another of our Members, Dr David Cooper. This had led her to wonder if it might be a good idea to offer a "Wanted" column in this newsletter. As she says, Bill does a great job on the bulb/seed exchange, but that doesn't necessarily answer those who have a very particular requirement, which might be met by material that another Member has. Well, I would be very happy to offer the facility if you would like to use it. So, if you have any "wants", just let me know and I will publish them.

Following on from that, the bulb/seed exchange is once again coming into view and there's a note about it later. In the meantime, Jon Evans has been in touch to point out that he believes that the bulbs that were donated last year under the name *Isophysis tasmanica* were actually *Gethyum atropurpureum*, a rather different plant, from the far side of the world. So, here's your chance to get your label correct!

Autumn Meeting 2012

As mentioned above, the Autumn 2012 meeting will be held on Sunday, 21st October 2012 at our normal venue, the Badger Farm Community Centre near Winchester. As in previous meetings, the doors will open at 10.00, with our speakers taking the stage at 11.00. The meeting will close at 16.00.

The main subject for the meeting will be a talk by Jack Gingell on a trip that he made to the Eastern Cape with Cameron McMaster. We don't have a formal session planned for the afternoon, though I hope that Bill will have returned from his trip to South Africa and be keen to show some of his latest material from that trip. However,

I would also encourage anyone who has some material to come forward and offer it up at the meeting, preferably in digital format.

As in all meetings, there will be a display table for any plants that you care to bring along to show Members. We hope to organise one of our informal discussions periods during the afternoon, so that Members can show their plants and answer any questions other might have. If any of you have slides or jpeg's of plants that you would like to show, please bring them along.

There will also be a sales table where you can offer material for sale on a 80:20 Member to Group basis. Please include double labels on pots, showing the price so that we can settle up easily at the end of the day.

There will be a lunch break from 12.30 until 14.00. For those of you that have not come before, it's worth adding that many Members bring their own food so that they can have the opportunity to chat to others. Alternatively, the Sainsbury's supermarket is based on the same site.

As usual, the charge for the meeting will be £3.00 each, payable at the door.

Directions to the meeting hall

Meetings are held at the Badger Hall Community Centre, near Winchester and, for those of you using satnav's or Google Earth, the post code is SO22 4QB.

By road, leave the M3 at junction 11 and proceed towards Winchester. At the first roundabout follow the sign to Winchester. At the second roundabout take the second exit up the hill towards Badger Farm. At the third roundabout take the third exit to the superstore (not the second exit marked Badger Farm). Follow the road right round the edge of the car park until you see the doctor's surgery. Next to it is the Community Centre.

There is plenty of room in the car park and it is free: However, this privilege depends on Members filling in the form at the entrance giving the car's registration details.

Regional Meeting

John Sanders and his wife invite members to come along to their garden at The Old Vicarage, South Clifton, Newark, Nottinghamshire NG23 7AD on the afternoon of Sunday 22nd July.

John says:

> 'The idea is to provide a venue for members to meet other bulb enthusiasts on an informal basis to chat about growing. My hope is that some of the members

from northern parts that do not attend the AGM might be encouraged to come along. Other points to note are:

- we will provide some light refreshments, teas/sandwiches/cakes etc
- it will be held from 2-5 pm, but there will be some flexibility on this depending on circumstances
- members to contact me in good time beforehand by phone or email to let me know their intention to come and I will provide any directions or other details if needed
- members are invited to bring plants/seeds for sale, swap or to give away, and also any plants in flower or that may be of interest to members, would be welcome for a show table
- my collection of plants will also be available to view
- any other ideas that members may have for the event, to enable everyone to get as much out of it as possible, would be welcome

South Clifton is between Newark and Lincoln and close to the A1 and A46.
John Sanders can be contacted on 01522 778661 or
sanders@johnsanders48.orangehome.co.uk

Seed exchange reminder **Bill Squire**

This year I will be in South Africa from 14th Aug to 12th September and hope to send out the listing by Week Ending 15th September. So send all donations any time before that; Trish will be here to take in the mail while I am away. My Address as normal is-:

8 Benmoor Rd, Creekmoor, Poole, Dorset, BH17 7DS

Drimia - Boring or Brilliant? **Jonathan Hutchinson**

Drimia has never caused an awful lot of passion in bulb growing circles and has even been stated, when in the field, as the bulb that you step on or over to look at something more interesting beyond!

I feel that this is a great shame for a genus that has many attractive species. It is true that some species have brown or green flowers, but there are many others besides that are well worth growing. Even those that are of more sombre colours, when looked at in detail, are quite beautiful. One of the disadvantages of growing this genus is that plants are often not identified to specific level; but then that can become a challenge

in itself, to unearth a name and in doing so one might even lead to a new species! Over recent years the genus has become more diverse, as once related genera, such as *Urginea, Tenicroa* and *Rhadamanthus*, have been sunk in to it, increasing still further the range of variation

Within South Africa, *Drimia* comes from both summer and winter rainfall areas so can easily give a full year's interest in cultivation. Conditions for growth also vary greatly, from arid situations to permanently wet ground; this to me also adds a lot of interest to their cultivation and the needs of the individual species
All *Drimia* are regarded as toxic and have poisoned cattle. This surely will have lead to their demise on grazing grounds. This same toxicity is sought out by users of traditional medicine and, sadly, this can lead to indiscriminate collecting with removal of whole colonies. Though attempts have been made to produce plants commercially, the collectors believe that the best properties are only found in wild collected material.

As to pests and diseases the ones that I find most difficult to deal with are mealy bugs, which get between leaf scales and other difficult to remove places. Petroleum white oils are effective to some degree but must not be applied as a soil drench as it will kill the bulb.

Below are a few *Drimia* that I particularly enjoy growing and which show some of the range within this very diverse genus. At the end of the name an 'S' or 'W' is shown to say whether it is winter or summer growing.

Drimia capensis (Urginea altissima) - S/W

This is the South African equivalent to *Urginea maritima* which is so familiar throughout the Mediterranean landscape. The flower spikes reach to 2m high.
Allan Hill a bulb grower in South Africa told me the following." Once, walking on the outskirts of Worcester, I found a heap of large *D. capensis* bulbs that somebody had dug up and then left, probably a traditional healer was disturbed while collecting - they would have filled a sack, each the size of a mans head!" The flowers do differ from *Urginea maritima* in that the petals of this species are reflexed making the stamens more prominent. Flower colour can also vary from white to yellowish .
The Afrikaans common name for *Drimia* is 'jeukbol' literally translated means 'itchy bulb.' In days past children would cut the bulbs and rub onto the skin of others, causing much itchiness.

Drimia exuviata – W

I first saw this plant growing in a tight rock outcrop on the west Cape coast, its reed like stems held tightly at their bases by attractive barred and ribbed papery sheaths. These barred cataphylls and lovely flowers made it well worth growing. This plant reaches up to 80cm in height . The flowers appear in the spring, are scented and about 2cm wide. The central purple back stripe on the petals is I think particularly attractive

Drimia physodes – W

Much less flamboyant than the previous species, but very much a favourite of mine. Its appeal for me is in the way that it's numerous, 10cm long black stemmed flower spikes break out from the neck of the bulb. The white flowers are about 1cm wide and on pedicels about 2.5cm long and rather remind me of a small outbreak of fireworks. The broad leaves are firm to the touch and have a slight twist in them down their length.

Drimia uniflora (*Litanthus pusilla)* - S

There are few of the *Drimia* that have ever reached the exalted position of receiving a common name, but this is one of them, being given the name of Fairy Snowdrop. The pale pink flowers on this wonderful miniature species are from just 4-8mm long the plants reach no more than 8cm at flowering time but my plants reach less than half that height. Its natural habitat is in rocky out crops and rock flushes where I am sure it must be dwarfed by the other dwarf plants that it grows along with.

Drimia haworthioides - W

This is one of the original *Drimia* species which have the characteristic small flowers with reflexed petals. This species with brownish green flowers that has been accused of having little horticultural merit…. Surely not !

This really is grown for the form of the bulb which is more reminiscent of a *Haworthia* and so more likely to be found in a collection of cacti and succulents. The bulb scales of this species expand to become club shaped once the leaf has died and last for a number of seasons to build up a 'head'of leaf bases. Like the 'windows'on some *Haworthia* species it has leaves where only the top surfaces are exposed to the sun, so these work in the same way with the end surfaces also having photosynthesising tissue**.** The actual foliage, which has fine hairs along the margins, is produced during the winter months and the flowers follow after the leaves in the summer.

Drimia mzimvubuensis – S

This and the following plant are both similar in bulb form to *Drimia haworthioides*, with their production of swollen leaf bases. These recently found species (reported in Veld and Flora in Sept 2003) are adapted to sheer, south facing cliff face habitats. The evergreen leaves of this species are linear about 50cm long , rounded, grooved, and dark green. The inflorescence is upright up to 38cm long and bearing 20-30 pendant flowers which are about 2cm wide and white with a greenish central stripe.

Instead of the stamens being separate as in most flowers here they form a cone shape it is thought that this is due to a specific pollination strategy, where the pollen collects on to the carpenter or honey bee pollinators by means of vibration. This has been given the wonderful term of buzz pollination (Proctor *et al.* 1996). The specific epithet refers to the Mzimvubu River on which steep shale cliffs it was found.

Drimia cremnophila – S

This species is a close relative of the previous, being found in a similar situation but it has significant differences. The bulb scales are much longer and the leaves broader and shorter than the previous reaching only to 20cm long The white flowers measure to about 1.5cm across and have dull purplish stripe in the center of each petal. *"cremnophila"* is derived from the Greek *Kremnos* = cliff + *philos* = loving

Both species have been found in similar locations in South Africa's Eastern Cape in subtropical habitat where they grow in tight crevices with a range of other succulents and shrubs. Presumably because of this habit they will prefer to become tight in their pots, though they are of very easy cultivation rooting readily from detached bulb scales.

Drimia sphaerocephalum - S

As the specific name suggests this has a rounded flower head which is produced at the top of a slender stem the small flowers with reflexed petals are a lovely silver grey with a hint of mauve. This is at home in marshy areas, the small white scaly bulbs being particularly vulnerable to a soil that becomes too dry. This species flowers just as the foliage, which is finely haired, is just emerging.

Drimia basuticum – S

When I received this years ago as seed from IBSA it was called *Thuranthos basuticum*, I had to grow it for a few years before it reached flowering but in that time it has become one of my favourites. Its perhaps not that surprising to find that it does have sombre coloured pale brown flowers, but the are held so beautifully on tall stems on pendant pedicels with reflexed petals that they have a real grace about them. It grows in wet heavy soil in the Eastern Cape.

Drimia cryptopoda - S
And now for something completely different! This plant really is a beauty. It's a native of Madagascar where it is rather rare. A small crown of leaves come up much like our native bluebell, but is kept quite short. From in the centre of these leaves is produced a short flower head of lovely pink flowers. As the specific name suggests the flower head is held quite low, but not hidden.

I would like to hope that this small selection would entice more growers to look at this lovely but often overlooked genus which really does deserve more merit than it gets.

Here's a picture of what might be a Drimia that I grow, but neither Jonathan or I am sure of what it might be. Any ideas? It's in a 1 litre pot, so its very small. Ed.

Pauridia minuta **Jon Evans**

Pauridia minuta is one of those plants which has always intrigued me when I have seen photos of it on the web or in books. Tiny, but charming, and a plant seldom mentioned, apparently scarcely in cultivation; it never appears on seedlists, or as a bulb for sale. A member of the *Hypoxidaceae* from the Western Cape where it grows in damp areas on the lower slopes. So when, in the course of discussion, a South African supplier said he thought he still had some in a pot somewhere, but had stopped listing it because it never sold, I asked him for some. So, early last year I received three tiny bulbs. One of these produced a few hair-like wispy green leaves for a while, the other two remained dormant.

In the autumn I watered the pot, along with all my other bulbs, and one bulb produced some stronger green leaves, whilst a second produced the green hairs, though the plants are still dwarfed by the 2.5in pot they are in. Just like one of those tiny grasses that are a weed in my alpine house. Then in November, it produced one tiny, but delightful flower no more than 3/16 of an inch or 5mm across. It's tricky to photograph, being white with a dark background, and particularly so in November. The last shot is the closest I could get with a 1:1 macro lens.

The plant didn't set seed, but has continued green, though it is no bigger now (April), and is starting to go dormant, so I need to withhold water until the autumn. I hope it will grow again next year.

Colour Coded Labels **Bill Squire**

I thought members might be interested in the system I use to aid my memory (or should I say lack of memory) by using a coloured label in the pots. Each colour is a prompt to do a specific thing at the appropriate time.

My system works like this:

- A yellow label reminds me that the plant is an acid loving one and therefore needs peat adding to the mix at repotting time.
- A green label in my *Lachenalia* pots is to show I am satisfied it is correctly named: I do this because I sometimes collected seed in South Africa when there are no visible flowers in sight and I maybe have to wait a few years until the bulbs mature and get confirmation of the name.
- Red reminds me the plant is a summer flowering one and therefore requires a different watering regime to the spring flowering types.
- Blue is used to show the bulb takes priority at the next potting on season, this could be because it's a seedling that has matured quicker than expected or because the square pot looks decidedly round.
- A black marker in my seedling pots I use once the bulb seed has germinated so that at the end of the growing season when they have returned to dormancy I know there are small bulbs there and will grow on again the following year (hopefully).

There is no end to the colour combinations that can be used as an aid to memory, the sky is the limit. It's not necessary to buy expensive labels because almost any plastic

material can be cut into strips for the purpose. The plastic banding that comes with a new domestic appliance is ideal, because it can be cut into 4inch strips and then cut lengthways, they come in many colours so are ideal for the job.