

Pelargonium ochroleucum

The bicoloured geranium from the Eastern Cape

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This rare and unusual *Pelargonium* from the Eastern Cape has yellow and white, bicoloured flowers, which are arranged in an inflorescence that appears to mimic a daisy. *Pelargonium ochroleucum* Harv. is a small geophytic geranium known from only a small number of herbarium specimens and has recently been assessed as Vulnerable on the Red Data List. Despite the small number of known localities, members of several overseas pelargonium and geranium societies have *P. ochroleucum* in their collections. It is not known who introduced the species into horticulture but it must have been fairly recently. It now appears to be threatened in its natural habitat despite being listed as a 'schedule five' protected species in the Eastern Cape.

According to the literature and herbarium specimens, *P. ochroleucum* was first collected by the horticulturalist and botanical collector, Johann Frantz Drège. He and his brother Carl Friedrich Drège collected plants during 1829–1830 in the Eastern Cape and collected *P. ochroleucum* in October 1829 in the vicinity of the Little and Great Fish Rivers (Somerset East). At that time herbarium specimens were sent to various European, British and South African herbaria. It was only in 1860 that William Harvey, a self-trained botanist, who acted as Colonial Treasurer at the Cape from 1836 to 1842, described it as a new species. Until recently herbarium specimens from only four collections from a small area around Somerset East and the Addo Elephant National Park (AENP) were known. Only two of these localities are known to us, namely Korhaan Vlakte in the AENP and Watsonia Farm near Somerset East.

In 2003 however, Jan Vlok found the species on the roadside just south of Oudtshoorn, some 300 km to the west. He noted that the plants were extremely localized there and that already the surrounding habitat was almost entirely ploughed for commercial cultivation. The small population of scattered plants at Korhaan Vlakte, AENP, is also threatened by the imminent construction of a pipeline. We have now alerted park officials of the rarity of the species and efforts will be made to 'search and rescue' as many plants as possible. Our observations show that it grows in stony, poorly drained shale in low karoid vegetation, usually in full sunlight or in bush scrub vegetation, and flowers in October and November. The species seems to be associated with the highly sensitive bontveld vegetation in the Thicket Biome.

Pelargonium flowers all have five petals, of which the posterior two differ from the anterior three with regard to size and



Pelargonium ochroleucum from Addo Elephant National Park. The unusual yellow and white bicoloured flowers are arranged in an inflorescence that appears to mimic a daisy. Photo: Dez Weeks.

shape. In the majority of species the posterior two petals are larger than the anterior three and also have nectar guides. Different colour shades of the posterior and anterior petals are not uncommon, but in *Pelargonium ochroleucum* we have a most unusual situation with two different colours, white and yellow in one flower. Harvey, in his original description mentioned that 'the petals also are of a colour unusual in this section; the two upper petals being greenish yellow, the lower ones white.' Furthermore, the flowers are born in an unusual way within the inflorescence: the greenish-yellow posterior petals are directed to the centre of the pseudo-umbel and the white anterior ones to the periphery, giving the appearance of a daisy. This arrangement of the flowers, called a pseudanthium (all the flowers in the pseudo-umbel together give the appearance of a single flower), probably plays a role in the pollination biology of the species. The name *ochroleucum* comes from the Latin word *ochraceus*, meaning yellow, changing to brown or *ochroleucus*, the same as *ochraceus*, but whiter.

Pelargonium ochroleucum belongs to the group of geraniums with turnip-shaped tubers known as section *Hoarea*, the largest section in *Pelargonium*. The majority of them are confined to the winter rainfall area of Namaqualand and the Western Cape province. Hoareas are difficult to find because they are dormant for long periods and therefore not visible, particularly during dry seasons, and because flowering time is usually very short. 🍷

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