Erica nana –
a magnificent potplant

From the high altitudes of the southwestern Cape mountains, this elusive plant is now accessible to the keen plant collector

text & photo by Anthony Hitchcock,
Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens

Erica nana was first collected in 1774 by Francis Masson, who was the first official collector sent out from Kew. Since then it has eluded all but the most determined collectors due to its restricted habitats high in the Hottentots Holland and Kogelberg mountains. With long periods between discoveries, many believed it to be lost. Fortunately this was not the case, and it was introduced into cultivation at Kirstenbosch by John Winter in 1972.

Cultivation

Erica nana has proved relatively easy to cultivate from seed and cuttings. Unfortunately it does not normally set seed under cultivation, but this may be overcome if the flowers are pollinated by hand. Fresh seed must be collected each year and sown in the autumn. The seed may be mixed with fine dry sand to facilitate even sowing, not deeper than 3 mm below the surface. The sowing medium must be well drained, acid soil. Cuttings should be carefully selected from the active new growth in autumn or winter. Erica nana assumes a hard woody growth habit; therefore, stock plants may be kept in semi-shady conditions for a few months to produce longer, more hercaceous cutting material. Cuttings are placed in shallow trays containing a fibrous, well-drained rooting medium, such as equal portions of finely milled pine bark and polystyrene pellets. The application of a suitable rooting hormone is recommended. Rooting is normally slow, taking up to three months and longer, even under optimum conditions, including overhead mist-spray and bottom-heating.

Plants should be grown in a well drained, acid medium. Potting soil should consist of equal parts of well composted pine bark and acid sands. Erica nana should be planted in full sunlight or where it receives light shade for part of the day. A little shade will result in the production of softer hercaceous growth and fewer flowers. Plants grown in full sunlight, however, produce more compact growth and better flower displays. It is advisable to provide container-grown plants with light shade after flowering, to protect them from excessive summer heat.

Plants must be watered frequently, but not overwatered. It is not necessary to feed; however, monthly applications of weak organic liquid fertilizers produce vigorous growth.

Potential

Erica nana is blessed with a number of attributes that make it a worthy horticultural subject. It has proved adaptable in cultivation at Kirstenbosch where it thrives in rockeries and containers. Although it grows relatively slowly it will outlive many of its fellow ericas. Its neat and compact growth habit lends itself to pot culture and obviates the necessity of pruning. During September and October, the plant puts out beautiful displays of bright yellow, tubular flowers. This magnificent erica is listed as critically rare. Truly a collector’s plant.

Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens will make available a limited number of mature plants of Erica nana in containers from the Daily Sales Shop on Saturday 13th October 1990.

References


Veld & Flora September 1990