WILD IRISES FOR THE GARDEN

Notes on the cultivation, propagation and availability of the genus *Dietes*

by Graham Duncan,
National Botanical Institute, Kirstenbosch

Resembling *Morchella* and *Iris*, to which it is closely related, *Dietes* is an attractive and very useful evergreen garden plant for frost-free areas. There are six species, of which five occur in southern Africa, while one species, the tall, white-flowered *D. robinsoniana* is endemic to Lord Howe Island, situated between Australia and New Zealand. Of the five southern African species, three are in common cultivation, namely *D. grandiflora*, *D. iridioides* and *D. bicolor*, while *D. flavia* is occasionally grown, but *D. butcheriana* is largely unknown in cultivation.

Cultivation

With the exception of *D. butcheriana*, which prefers full shade, the genus requires a very lightly shaded to full sun position for successful flowering. They will produce ample foliage when planted in full shade, but will then hardly ever flower. Although *Dietes* will grow in even the poorest of soils, for optimum results they are best grown in rich garden soil containing plenty of well-decomposed leafmould or compost. The underground portion of the plant is a creeping rhizome with a strong fibrous root system. Liberal watering throughout the year is recommended, particularly in summer, but the genus easily withstands periods of drought in winter.

The striking evergreen fans of leaves and the abundance of flowers in spring and summer make *Dietes* an ideal subject for mass plantings or for use in mixed planting such as with spring or summer flowering annuals. They are also useful for difficult corners of the garden, and with their strong root systems are suitable for stabilizing

A shade-loving plant, *Dietes butcheriana* should be grown for its beautiful fan of broad, bright green leaves. Its white flowers, make it a welcome addition to a shade garden. This is growing in the Camphor Avenue at Kirstenbosch. Photo: Graham Duncan.

Veld & Flora September 1993
steep banks. A striking feature of *D. butcheriana*, *D. grandiﬂora* and *D. iridioides* is the manner in which the flowers are produced *en masse* at well-deﬁned intervals. The ﬂowers of *D. butcheriana*, *D. ﬂavida* and *D. iridioides* are fleeting, to say the least, lasting less than eight hours, while those of *D. grandiﬂora* last for three days.

*D. bicolor* produces a succession of ﬂowers, each lasting one day. *Dietes* is hardly ever attacked by pests or diseases, although the ﬂowers are sometimes eaten by CMR beetles. The plants do not harbour snails.

**Propagation**

With the exception of the slower-growing *D. butcheriana*, the sun-loving *Dietes* species, especially *D. bicolor*, rapidly multiply when grown under ideal conditions and thick clumps need to be lifted, divided and replanted every three to four years to maintain successful ﬂowering. Division can be done in autumn after ﬂowering, or in early spring, just before vigorous growth begins. Two forks, placed back to back in the centre of a thick clump can be used to prise individual plants apart. Older sections of the rhizome can be cut back and the foliage should be trimmed down by about half, leaving the centre new leaf intact. Replanting should be done as soon as possible; thereafter the soil must be kept moist until the plants are well established.

Due to the very hard seed coat of *Dietes*, seed germinates erratically over an extended period, which may run into several years. A seed tray of *D. butcheriana* in the Kirstenbosch bulb nursery has been yielding seedlings over a four year period, with best germination occurring in the fourth year. Seed can be sown as soon as it is ripe, in a mixture of equal parts compost, river-sand and loam, in deep seed-trays and placed in a shaded position and kept moist. Young plants should be established individually in black bags before planting out in the garden.

*Diets bicolor*

Growing to a height of 1.5 m this narrow-leaved plant has lemon-yellow ﬂowers with brownish-orange blotches in the centre, and is an excellent subject for poorly drained, boggy areas in full sun. It likes a very rich soil and is an extremely vigorous grower under ideal conditions which needs to be lifted and replanted every three years. It occurs naturally in the eastern Cape.

*Diets butcheriana*

The very broad, bright green leaves of this rarely cultivated plant from the Transkei and Natal coastal forests at once distinguish it from the other species.

Occurring naturally in the Eastern Cape, *Dietes bicolor* is a vigorous grower and is an excellent subject for poorly drained, boggy areas in full sun.

Photo: Graham Duncan

Unlike the other species, it must be grown in shade, and flowers well in even, dense shade, making it a very welcome addition to the shade garden. Its main attraction however, is not in its white ﬂowers with pale orange markings, which are only mildly attractive and short lived, but in its beautiful fan of broad, bright green leaves. It is not as fast growing as the other species and clumps can be left to grow for five or six years before dividing becomes necessary. In the
Indigenous to the Eastern Cape, Transkei and Natal. *Dietes grandiflora* is without doubt the most desirable of all the species. It flowers profusely from spring to the end of summer.

Camphor Avenue in Kirstenbosch this species has become well established, and the shade-loving groundcovers *Crassula pollucida* ssp. *brachypetala* and *Plectranthus ciliatus* have been interplanted with eye-catching results. Growing to a height of 0.75 m, *D. butcheriana* is also suitable for mixed plantings with other low to medium sized shade-loving perennials like *Impatiens sylvicola* and the attractive *Laportea grossa* (stinging nettle).

**Dietes flavid**
Occurring naturally in northern Natal, Swaziland and in the Eastern Cape, the cream to pale yellow flowers of this species, with their brownish markings are produced at irregular intervals during summer. The long, fairly broad and very erect dark green leaves are probably the most attractive feature of this plant. It grows to a height of about 1.2 m and can be grown in a very lightly shaded to full sun position.

**Dietes grandiflora**
Occurring naturally in the Eastern Cape, Transkei and Natal, this is without doubt the most desirable of all the species, and is widely grown for its large white blooms with yellow markings and blue style branches. It flowers from spring to the end of summer and can always be relied upon for its profuse flowering, at well defined intervals. Reaching a height of about 1.2 m it multiplies very rapidly under ideal conditions and is an excellent plant for full sun positions in both large and small gardens.

**Dietes iridioides**
Previously very well known by its old name *D. vegeta*, this species is often confused with *D. grandiflora*, which it resembles in some respects. *D. iridioides* is a smaller, more compact plant with much smaller white flowers and blue style branches, which do not have the yellow markings of *D. grandiflora*. It reaches a height of 0.3-0.8 m and is suitable as a groundcover or as an edging plant in difficult areas of the garden and rapidly forms thick clumps under any conditions. Ideally, it does best in very light shade. It is the most widely distributed of all the species, occurring from the southern Cape in an easterly direction, up to tropical East Africa.

**Availability**
*Dietes grandiflora* and *D. iridioides* are obtainable from many retail nurseries in South Africa, while *D. bicolor* is less commonly available. As far as I know, *D. flavid* and *D. butcheriana* are hardly ever offered for sale. Limited quantities of *D. butcheriana* will be made available at the Botanical Society’s 1994 Plant Sale, and in the near future, *D. flavid* will also be offered. Seed of this species will also become available from the Botanical Society’s annual seedlist.