

Working with the seasons

The new Kirstenbosch Bulb Terrace

by **Graham Duncan**, Kirstenbosch

Heavy winter rains, inadequately drained soils and insufficient winter light levels experienced in many parts of Kirstenbosch preclude the display of a wide variety of our spectacular wealth of winter-growing bulbous plants in the garden itself. In addition, the depredations of moles, and more importantly, marauding porcupines place further constraints on bulbs that can be displayed to the public. For these reasons the more fastidious species are cultivated under cover in the Kirstenbosch bulb nursery and displayed in containers, in season, inside the Kay Bergh Bulb House of the Botanical Society Conservatory.

Although bulbous plants that are able to stand up to the rigours of general garden cultivation are displayed in many parts of the garden, no section is specifically dedicated to bulbs. However, with the recent completion of the Centre for Home Gardening, an area known as the Bulb Terrace has been specifically provided for the display of both winter- and summer-growing bulbs. We hope these displays will draw attention to the many bulbous species suitable for home gardens.

Passing through the Centre for Home Gardening towards the garden, the Bulb Terrace comprises eight broadly rectangular beds on either side of the sloping main bricked walkway adjacent to the new Kirstenbosch Tearoom. Four beds on each side of the walkway alternate with wooden benches. Quantities of heavy, poorly

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LEFT: *Babiana stricta* var. *regia* flowering in the foreground, with the Centre for Home Gardening entrance and Table Mountain as a backdrop. Photo: Graham Duncan.



ABOVE: The dwarf *Watsonia coccinea* provides a brilliant splash of reddish-orange in mid-September.
Photo: Graham Duncan.

BELOW: *Ornithogalum thyrsoides* provides a long-lasting display of white from mid to late spring.
Photo: Graham Duncan.

drained soil was removed from each bed. This was replaced with a thick layer of crushed stone chips for the dual purpose of improving drainage and obstructing the progress of ravenous molerats.

A layer of bidim cloth was placed over the stone chips for added drainage, then filled to ground level with a free-draining bulb growing medium prepared in the nursery.

Winter and spring bulbs

Microclimatic conditions on the left and right hand sides of the terrace differ markedly, and the deciduous nature of most of our indigenous bulbs provides a challenge in ensuring a colourful display for as many months of the year as possible. Full sun prevails throughout the year on the right hand side while on the left, shaded to partially shaded conditions are experienced for most of the winter, and full sun in summer.

Due to the requirements the winter-growing species have for successful flowering, including high light intensity during the winter growing period and a dry summer rest, the bulbs are potted-up into 12, 15 or 20 cm diam. plastic pots (depending on the species) in the nursery and plunged into the four sunny beds on the right hand side of the terrace in autumn.

To provide interest throughout the



year, this side of the terrace has been inter-planted with low-growing perennials and succulents including *Acmadenia heterophylla*, *Pelargonium betulinum*, *P. exstipulatum* and *Aloe succotrina*.

In early summer, after seeds have been harvested, the plunged pots of dormant bulbs are lifted and taken back to the nursery for the summer, and the remaining open spaces planted up with quick-growing summer-flowering annuals like *Arctotis venusta*. Bulbous species that performed well here during the first spring season include *Babiana angustifolia*, *B. stricta*, *B. thunbergii*, *B. villosa*, *Freesia alba*, *Ixia viridiflora*, *Moraea aristata*, *Ornithogalum thyrsoides*, *Tritonia crocata*, *Watsonia aletroides* and *W. coccinea*. The selection and planting design of species on display will be expanded and changed each season.

Summer bulbs

Many of our deciduous summer-growing bulbs are able to withstand the shaded, wet winter conditions at Kirstenbosch during their winter dormant period and a selection of these have been planted on the left side of the terrace, towards the central and rear of each bed.

In order to provide spring and early summer colour to the front of these beds, pots of *Ornithogalum thyrsoides* and *Watsonia aletroides* grown in the nursery are plunged as soon as flower buds start to form. While light levels in



ABOVE: A close up of the exquisite dwarf form of *Gloriosa superba*. Photo: Graham Duncan.

BELOW: In the front border, a dwarf form of *Gloriosa superba* provides long-lasting colour from midsummer to early autumn, inter-planted with *Geranium multisectum*. The bold blue *Agapanthus inapertus* hybrid 'Lydenburg' flowers in the background. Photo: Graham Duncan.





LEFT: *Berkheya purpurea* planted as a front border to summer-flowering bulbs. Photo: Graham Duncan.



RIGHT: The semi-evergreen *Crocosmia aurea* flourishes in dappled shade and flowers in late summer and early autumn. Photo: Graham Duncan.

Thankfully, the Kirstenbosch porcupines failed to ravage the terrace during its first flowering season in the winter/spring of 2003

this area of the terrace are not ideal for the latter two species, once flower buds have been formed under ideal conditions in the nursery, they continue to develop and flower in the garden.

To provide a continuous display of bulb growth in the foreground of these beds from late spring into summer, rootstocks of a dwarf form of *Gloriosa superba* (previously known as *G. virescens*) have been deeply planted in open ground, directly underneath the plunged pots of *Ornithogalum thyrsoides*; thus when the latter are ready to be taken back to the nursery, the *Gloriosa* start to make an appearance. The attractive clinging foliage of this dwarf form of *Gloriosa* and its long lasting blooms, ornamental seed capsules and shiny brownish-orange seeds provide months of interest from early summer to late autumn.

Summer-growing and evergreen species chosen for the central and rear

parts of these beds include the deciduous tall white *Agapanthus inapertus* subsp. *inapertus* 'White', the bold deep blue *A. inapertus* hybrid 'Lydenburg', *Eucomis autumnalis* and *Scilla natalensis*, as well as the evergreen *Dierama trichorhizum* and the semi-evergreen *Crocosmia aurea*. Interspersed between these summer-flowering bulbs, colleague Liesl van der Walt has planted low to medium height perennials like *Geranium multisectum*, *Chironia linoides* and *Berkheya purpurea*, that provide excellent foliar and floral contrast against the bulbous species. Waist-high information boards skillfully designed by colleague Alice Notten provide succinct, entertaining details on indigenous bulb-growing.

Porcupine raids

While molerats are unlikely ever to gain access to the Bulb Terrace, the same cannot be said for those other stealthy night creatures, the porcu-

pine. Although their predilection for *Zantedeschia aethiopica* rootstocks may serve as some measure of protection to the Bulb Terrace display by providing ample stocks of this plant in surrounding areas, I fear their second-most favoured choice of tasty irid corms (that comprise most of the winter-growing section of the display) would not dissuade them from visiting the terrace.

Thankfully the porcupines failed to ravage the terrace during its first flowering season in the winter/spring of 2003. This may or may not have been due to the application of pungent scatter crystals (known under the rather explicit trade name of 'Get Off My Garden') that slowly release a strong, highly perfumed odour meant to confuse both cats' and dogs' sense of smell. While one would like to think that this product has had the desired effect, it seems more like wishful thinking!