When I first heard of kukumakrankas I was a youngster in the Sea Point village kindergarten and when the name, sounding like some incantation or abracadabra, came from the lips of a Danish boy claiming he had picked flowers on the nearby hill that week, I shared the general disbelief of the new sub A and sub B class. There we sat, with our slates in front of us, ready to draw the strokes and pothooks which formed our earliest lessons in writing before moving on to figures and the alphabet. That afternoon several of us crossed what is now the busy High Level Road and searched the Signal Hill slope for the rare wonder flowers with the ‘funny name and nice taste and smell’. There were salmon-coloured tulips in plenty and common white and yellow daisies everywhere, as well as the first early buttercups, but there were no signs of kukumakrankas. We were the cuckoos, our elders said afterwards, and so in my case, let me confess, decades were to pass before this Sea Pointer caught up with the plant with the Hottentot name that the great Swedish botanist, Thunberg, had made a note of while at the Cape two centuries ago.

It was, however, the London-born William Burchell, who in his classic Travels in the interior of Southern Africa (published in 1822 and 1824), explained:

*The children of Cape Town sometimes go out in search of Kukumakranka; and as it is difficult to find them, being very inconspicuous among the herbage, they consider it a little triumph to return home with a few; and the Kukumakranka season (June) never passes unnoticed.*

If only Burchell’s Travels had been available in my Sea Point kindergarten days! I cannot, however, fault Dreyer’s school at Primrose Villa on the quiet main road of 1911 where the three Rs were well and unforgottably taught. Even today, with study and botanical knowledge abounding, it would still be considered more than a little triumph to come across, and recognize, the kukumakranka flower. In the first place, as Burchell noted, the plant is never conspicuous, and the pretty little pink or white flower with six narrow ribbon-like petals appears, almost stalkless, close to the ground. It is, however, not the flower which so much proclaims the kukumakranka’s presence as the fragrance given...
out by the tube of sac-like fruit rising through the soil like a long transparent berry after the flower has faded and the leaves appear. These leaves have been described variously as twisted and grass-like, sometimes coiled spirally almost like watch springs.

It is known of course that the fruits were once used in the same way as lavender sachets to perfume linen cupboards, handkerchief drawers and even entire drawing rooms. When Thunberg was at the Cape he specially noted that:

*The smell of kukumakranke resembled in some measure that of strawberries and filled the whole room. It was held in great esteem by the ladies.*

Obviously the kukumakranke is no ordinary member of the Amaryllis family, if indeed you could call the family ordinary when it contains such contrasts as the shy, curly, pink-petalled nerine, the red ifafa lily with its loose umbels of tubular orange and red flowers and that bold declaration of autumn known as the March lily.

It was the inimitable fundi of the Cape flora, the late Dudley D’Ewes, who described in a Cape Town morning paper how as boy and man he had always looked out for the fruit of the kukumakranke and had only seen the flowers once, on the tracks of Kenilworth racecourse, and had never found a fruit. The fruit when first formed, he had learned, is underground and remains there for the several months required for ripening, after which it is pushed up to scent the surroundings. This fragrance is the most notable property of the fruit.

It was the great Linnaeus, names of so many of our flowers, who gave the kukumakranke its botanical description, *Gethyllis afr.* *Gethyllis* in Greek simply means a little onion or leek and the long neck shape of the bulb shows how apt the name is.

The late Dr Louisa Bolus, one of South Africa’s most distinguished botanists, used to recall her delight as a child looking for the Christmas veld which had such a brief season. The long interval of four months between the flowering and fruiting stages of the kukumakrankas certainly was a cardinal reason for these two stages not being generally known at all.

The great Dr Marloth tells us in his classic *Flora of South Africa* how he grew some of the bulbs in a box for several years and found, one December morning, that five

*The emerging fruit of *Gethyllis brittoniana*. The smell and taste of the fruit is like custard apple.*

*Photo: William Lidyard.*
buds had appeared above the ground during the night, opening a few hours after sunrise. They had been stimulated by a light shower of rain the previous day. Marloth noted that the bulbs, after four months of dormancy, "had sent up their flowers as if regulated by clockwork". Dr Louisa Bolus summed up what happens after the flowers disappear and deep down in the soil the fruit develops and, when fully matured, waits for the softening showers of late autumn and early winter to coax it upwards:

\begin{quote}
Then the short peduncle stretches until the whole of the fruit is forced through the moist ground. Its bright color and strong scent make it very conspicuous and attractive to birds, sheep, porcupines and other animals eating the juicy pulp and act as agents for distributing the seeds.
\end{quote}

The last word has certainly not been written on *Gethyllis atra*. Dudley D'Ewes for a long time shared the quite common belief that the plant was practically on the point of extinction. Then a keen young botanist working on the genus at Kirstenbosch some years ago showed him a cluster of flowers from bulbs planted there so that they could be studied in detail in all their stages. It can now be accepted that far from being another endangered species kukumakranskas still occur in thousands and that even in the Cape Peninsula there are far more than most folk suspect. Nor are they confined to the Peninsula and the Boland. Harry Hall, that meticulous fundi of Cape flora, recorded in Veld & Flora (June 1978) that during his years in Vredendal he had seen kukumakranskas in vast numbers widely spread around southern Namqualand in undisturbed veld. Moreover he reported that in the sandveld and mountains of Van Rhynsdorp there were a number of other even more beautiful species, one with wine-red flowers.

Yet how well the kukumakranska has managed to baffle Argus in July 1953, is of a typical Lawrence Green leader page article reporting that Tulbagh school children were gathering... as many varieties of kukumakranska as possible for laboratory workers of the Botanical Research Institute, Pretoria, investigating the medical properties of the plant. Kukumakranska blends well with brandy and (possibly for this reason) it has been a favourite medicine in the country for centuries. It is used mainly for stomach-ache. The flowers, steeped in boiling water, but without the brandy, are given to babies with teething troubles.

In his book Beyond the City Lights, Green hazarded a guess that the plant's name might have been corrupted from the... Homo sapiens becomes abundantly clear from Harry Hall's valuable summing up on the subject of its flowering:

\begin{quote}
I was frequently surprised, when discussing kukumakranskas with country folk to realize that though they spoke of their interest in and love for these juicy aromatic fruits, they seemed surprised to be told they developed from an underground bulb, that there was a tuft of leaves in winter and even more surprised to be told that they first had to produce attractive if short-lived flowers. 'Never seen flowers', they say!
\end{quote}

I am indebted to Mr Hall for his succinct observations. Nor should I wish to omit an acknowledgement to an old press colleague, the late Lawrence G. Green, whose extensive and popular writings included references to the kukumakranska (though he spelt it koeekmankranka in his day). A cutting from The Cape...
Afrikaans words ‘goed vir my krank maag’ (good for my sick stomach) and he quoted a Cape Agricultural Journal’s recipe for kukumakranke brandy published last century:

Put a little of this highly scented fruit in a little good brandy. The perfume will be transferred to the spirit within a few days and a beautiful nip will be at your command... This Cape liqueur rivalled imported yellow chartreuse. The astonishing name of the plant is of itself enough to create demand.

At one time in the Western Province countryside it was an autumn custom to participate in a hunt or two for the highly perfumed fruit and legend has it that everyone joined in: farmers, the ministers, magistrates, teachers, shop-keepers, women and children, some of whom had already scouted out the land in summer when the tiny strawberry-scented, star-shaped flowers appeared and had ringed with pebbles or even sticks the places where the fruit would be found later. A few generations ago, Green mentions, it was possible to gather a hundred or so in a single afternoon outside Genes or Darling. A Cape Times correspondent in June 1974, signing herself ‘Becky (Paarl)’, recalled attending the La Rochelle girls’ school and going for long walks at weekends on the Huguenot to Wellington road when kukumakranke left fragrant memories.

Stopping on the way at Charleston Hill we would lie down to smell the earth and find these scented roots to dig up and take home to dry out.

Only twice have I come across such roots myself and on both occasions I was walking along tar-macadam roads with never a thought for the subject of this chapter. The first time was at Gordon’s Bay after very heavy rains when the then recently constructed road above the village went as far as Steenbras River mouth. There were minor landslides of gravel and stones onto the road. At one of these my wife and I were attracted to that same sweet strawberry fragrance which Thunberg and Burchell recorded. For us it was a ready-made discovery laid bare by an excess of rain. There were several fruits exposed, each about finger-length.

On the second occasion we were on Tafelberg Road between Kloof Nek and the Table Mountain Cableway station. Again there had been unusually heavy rains and the loose clay and gravel bank revealed the fruits that even if not seen would possibly have been smelt. They were also discovered nearby one Christmas Day by the late Karl Hauser who described a small isolated colony of kukumakranke in flower and succeeded in taking a colour photograph, amongst dry tufts of grass, of sweetly scented delicate flowers on 16 cm stems with a central pink vein on each of the six glistening white petals.

There seems no end, however, to the subject of kukumakranke when you mention the word in the company of rural folk in the Cape Province, or mention its botanical name at Kow, Kirstenbosch and other places round the world where botanists and horticulturists have become aware of our elusive but seemingly locally ever-present Cape bulb which was first introduced to Europe in 1780. There, during the course of two centuries the bulb has acquired the apt name of the Cape crocus but this singularly appropriate common name remains, to the best of my knowledge, unapplied in our Cape Floral Kingdom.

That classic work Sanders’ Encyclopaedia of Gardening which first appeared in weekly serial form in Amateur Gardening (London) in 1895 (and has run to twenty-two revised editions and forty-one impressions since then) contains valuable references to Gethyllis (Cape crocus) especially for greenhouse growers of bulbous plants. However, two extraordinary errors, or misprints, I suspect, which may well have puzzled generations of growers, gave the height of G. afric and the height of G. spiralis as nine feet! Such Jack and the Beanstalk figures stand corrected in the latest edition (1978), revised by A.G.L. Hallyer, which I recently bought in Cape Town. This lists five species of Gethyllis, all native to South Africa, namely G. afric, red and white, six inches; G. ciliaris, white, six inches; G. lanceolata, white, nine inches; G. spiralis, white, nine inches and G. villosa, white, nine inches.

And that is all I can tell you about the kukumakranke bulb whose curious name I first heard in a Sea Point kindergarten over seventy years ago.

About the Author
Conrad Lighton was a well-known journalist and author who retired as Editor of the Diamond Fields Advertiser in 1965. In 1960 he wrote his best-known book, Cape Floral Kingdom, one of the first publications to successfully popularise the Cape flora. Written in a pleasant and very readable style, it ran to two editions. Conrad Lighton felt strongly about the importance of conserving the rich floral heritage of South Africa and served on the Council of the Botanical Society from 1960 until his transfer to Kimberley at the end of 1962. He was also a fellow of the Royal Horticultural Society and an Honorary Nature Conservation Officer.

He died in 1985 and this article, written as a chapter of a sequel to his book Cape Floral Kingdom, was submitted by his wife, Elsie, to whom the book was dedicated.