

The Kaoko and Ruacana petalidiums

by Ernst van Jaarsveld, Kirstenbosch



ABOVE: *Petalidium coccineum*, the Kaoko petalidium and LEFT: *Petalidium bracteatum*, the Ruacana petalidium. An illustration by botanical artist, Elbe Joubert from plants collected by the author at Kaoko-Oktavi and a pass near Ruacana in northern Namibia.

Horticultural treasures from the Kaokoveld

Us horticulturists are always keeping an eye out for plants that show 'horticultural promise' and this is the story of how we 'discovered' these two very showy red-flowered *Petalidium* species from northern Namibia. This diverse genus consisting of thirty or so species in South Africa and Namibia, ranges from small scrambling herbs to large robust shrubs.

During an expedition to the Kaokoveld in July 1997 to collect plants for our Botanical Society Conservatory at Kirstenbosch, I made a few cuttings of a shrub near Kaoko-Oktavi on a dolomite outcrop growing in *Mopane* woodland. Although it was not in flower, we usually collect cuttings of the Acanthaceae family, which contains about fifty genera in southern Africa, as many show horticultural promise. The local Afrikaans name for this family is klapperbos or tongklapper as the seeds are released explosively when wet. One cutting of the Kaoko-Oktavi plant rooted and grew rapidly.

Then one summer day a bright red flower caught my eye: it was the Kaoko-Oktavi shrub from the Kaokoveld. I then

identified it as *Petalidium rubescens** (or as it is now regarded, as *Petalidium coccineum*) and we took many cuttings from it. I soon realized that it wanted to scramble, and decided to try it as a creeper on the pillars of the Botanical Society Conservatory. With the help of Freddie van Wyk, my assistant in the conservatory, the pillars were covered with netting and the plants planted in large containers at the base, together with the indigenous laurel fig (*Ficus ilicina*) from Namaqualand. This was a great success and the *Petalidium coccineum* rapidly covered the netting and graced the conservatory with beautiful red flowers.

The flowers of the Kaoko petalidium are typical of bird-pollinated flowers and they are occasionally visited by lesser double-collared sunbirds that visit the conservatory. Whilst reading up about the Kaoko petalidium in *Flowering Plants of Africa*, I saw that a second species, *Petalidium bracteatum*, was mentioned by the author Amelia Obermeyer (the author of both red-flowering species). This motivated us to look for

the second species that occurs further east in Kaokoland.

During a subsequent expedition we were indeed fortunate to locate this second species on a pass close to Ruacana on the Angolan border where it is a common roadside pioneer, and also grows on steep sandstone rock faces. Cuttings and seed were collected and soon *Petalidium bracteatum* was growing in profusion on the conservatory pillars as well!

I took both species to Elbe Joubert who prepared the beautiful illustration featured here. According to Amelia Obermeyer both species were also cultivated at the former Botanical Research Institute's conservatory at Pretoria from plants collected by Dr Bernard de Winter.

Both petalidiums benefit from severe pruning in winter, after which they rapidly recover and flower profusely in summer, autumn and winter. They are

remarkably tolerant of dry conditions and resistant to insect attacks, and are easily grown from cuttings. In the Western Cape both species are best grown indoors as container plants but they are ideal for growing outside in a dry bushveld garden further north.

*Although *Petalidium rubescens* is now officially regarded as *Petalidium coccineum*, the two differ quite remarkably: the latter a small sprawling shrub on quartzitic cliffs and screes in the Kunene Valley, whilst *Petalidium rubescens* is a tall shrub confined to dolomite outcrops near Kaoko-Otavi.

RIGHT: The Ruacana petalidium or rooibekkiebos *Petalidium bracteatum*.

Photo: Ernst van Jaarsveld.

BELOW: The habitat of the Kaoko petalidium *Petalidium coccineum* near Kaoko-Oktavi in the Kaokoveld of northern Namibia with the small tree, *Erythrina decora*, in the foreground. Most of the approximately thirty species of *Petalidium* recorded for South Africa and Namibia are found in bushveld (savanna) regions. Photo: Ernst van Jaarsveld.



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RIGHT: The Kaoko petalidium or Kaoko rooibekkiebos *Petalidium coccineum* growing on the netted pillars in the Botanical Society Conservatory at Kirstenbosch. Photo: Ernst van Jaarsveld.

