



NERINE HUTTONIAE

A RARE EASTERN CAPE ENDEMIC FROM THE FISH RIVER

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Living in the Eastern Cape has its perks, particularly if you happen to be interested in the remarkable flora and vast unspoiled landscapes. It isn't surprising that we keep coming across interesting and beautiful plants that were last recorded by the likes of Schönland, Galpin and

MacOwan at the turn of the century, the harsh and inaccessible valley bushveld always seems to present new surprises. Recently we came across a good example in the Fort Brown district, some 40 km north east of Grahamstown. A population of about sixty *Nerine huttoniae* bulbs

in full bloom can't be described as anything less than the 'wow factor' that is so sought after by the Eastern Cape tourism board!

After having realized that the plants in question were in fact *Nerine* and not *Brunsvigia* species (they are each at least 35 cm high!), it came as a surprise to



Nerine huttoniae flowers during a one-week period in early March along the banks of the Great Fish River.

Photo: D. Weeks.

find only a handful of specimens in the Schönland Herbarium, including Selmar Schönland's type material from Sheldon, also on the Fish River. The type specimen bears a note by Schönland explaining that the material was in fact from a cultivated plant collected by

Mrs. C. Hutton and grown in the Albany Museum gardens in 1903. It is also surprising that besides Cythna Letty's illustration in *Flowering Plants of South Africa* (Volume 29, plate 1130) we were unable to find a photograph of this striking plant in any of the regional field-guides.

Subsequent to Mrs. Hutton's collection the next specimen deposited in the National Herbarium in Pretoria was in 1948, forty-five years later, also from the Fish River. This, together with the poor representation of the species in the Schönland Herbarium, suggests that it is certainly uncommon if not rare. The current *Red data list of southern African plants* (1996) lists *N. huttoniae* as insufficiently known, i.e. taxa suspected but not definitely known to be extinct, endangered, vulnerable or rare because of the lack of information. Its closest relative is *N. laticoma*, from the northern Free State and Northern Cape provinces from which it is separated by virtue of its appendiculate filaments and concave leaves. *N. laticoma* is not listed in the *Red data list*.

Nerine huttoniae appears to be restricted to the banks of the Great Fish River and grows in the alluvial sandy soil that is intensively cultivated thanks to its fertility and proximity to water. It is no coincidence that our population is on the eastern side of the Fish River. The former Ciskei had very little extensive cultivation in the past and suitable habitats survived commercial agriculture whereas the western banks have been under irrigation for decades. The neighbouring previous homeland on the other hand has an estimated stocking rate over four times more than the recommended rate of the Department of Agriculture in 1994. From our own observation it seems that small stock do not eat *Nerine* plants, however they do eat just about everything else and large numbers of goats often result in mass erosion and habitat loss. Articles of this nature often draw attention to rare and threatened plants while at the same time

forecasting their inevitable demise. Fortunately in this case the Great Fish River Reserve Complex of approximately 45 000 ha includes at least 100 km of the Fish River with ideal habitat for the long-term survival of *N. huttoniae*. These particular habitat requirements are shared with another rarity from a related horticultural group, *Cyrtanthus smithiae*, not surprisingly with very similar habit and ecological characteristics.

Nerine huttoniae has relatively large bulbs for the genus, about 4 cm in diameter, and up to eight strap-like leaves reaching 25 cm in length. The fruit matures very quickly and seeds often begin germinating while still attached to the inflorescence. We have visited the population over a two-year period and have found that the extremely synchronized flowering period is very short, one week in early March, producing relatively large fleshy seeds two weeks later. Conditions are extremely hot and most often dry with short sporadic summer rains, the plants grow in full sun and are exposed to extreme day and night temperatures. During winter (April - August) the ground is bone dry. With this in mind we have successfully cultivated *N. huttoniae* in containers, in sandy, well-drained soil in direct sunlight and a severe water regime. It is easy to grow and very beautiful and has the potential to be a successful horticultural subject although its flowering period is so short.

Small quantities of seed have been made available to a local nursery that will undertake to introduce *N. huttoniae* into commercial cultivation. For further information please contact The Croft Nursery, P.O. Box 61, Stutterheim, 4930. (See advert in the classified section). ☺

Further reading

- Flowering plants of South Africa*. (1952). *Nerine huttoniae*: Plate 1130.
 Norris, C.A. (1974). The Genus *Nerine*. *The Nerine Society Bulletin* 6, 7-31.
 Saunders, R. (1997). *Nerines in South Africa*. *Herbertia* 52, 88-89, 186-187.
 Schönland, S. (1903). New and little known plants. *Records of the Albany Museum* 1(1), 49.