

# STREPTOCARPUS FORMOSUS

For house and garden.

by Liesl van der Walt, Kirstenbosch

Walking down the Camphor Avenue at Kirstenbosch, one cannot but stop to admire *Streptocarpus formosus* or Cape primrose as it is commonly known. Growing in low clumps, they flower profusely throughout the summer months. *Formosus*, meaning beautiful, is a perfect description of this species with its trumpets of soft mauve and white flowers.

*Streptocarpus* belong to the family Gesneriaceae, as do African violets (*Saintpaulia*). More than 100 species of *Streptocarpus* are found from central Africa to South Africa, in Madagascar and in Asia, yet most species are found in southern Africa. In the wild, *Streptocarpus formosus* is found in subtropical forests around Port St Johns in the Transkei and in the sandstone gorges of Umtamvuna and Oribi in KwaZulu-Natal where the summers are very humid and hot and the winters only marginally cooler and dry. They grow at the bottom of these gorges on rocks in small pockets of well-drained soil and on the branches of large trees.

*Streptocarpus* is fascinating for each leaf is an individual plant with its own roots and flowering stems. *Streptocarpus formosus* forms thick clumps – the long, strappy, dark green leaves arranged in a rosette. The leaves are almost succulent and are covered in little white hairs. Their veins are prominent, especially on the underside where the



Above A clump of *Streptocarpus formosus* growing in the shade of the old Camphor Avenue, Kirstenbosch.

Below *Streptocarpus formosus* in its natural habitat, growing on a tree in the Umtamvuna Gorge, KwaZulu-Natal. Photos: L. van der Walt.



midrib and side branches form thick ridges. The tips of the leaves often die off when plants are stressed by low temperatures. Although the brown ends may look unattractive this survival tactic does not harm the plants as the leaves simply form an abscission layer and continue to grow from their base.

*Streptocarpus formosus* flowers from late spring to autumn. One or two flowers are

formed at the tips of the long flowering stems. Each leaf usually has a few flowering stems of different ages, shooting from the base. The large trumpet-shaped flowers are white with soft mauve markings that run along the edge of the petals and into the distinctive, yellow-floored throat. Each delicate flower lasts a few days even when cut for the vase. The plants seem to be self-pollinated, but are easily cross-pollinated, even with other species. Thousands of fine brown seeds are released within a month or two after flowering. When dry, the long fruits have an interesting way of unfolding like a spiral, from which the name *Streptocarpus* (Greek *streptos* = twisted and *carpus* = fruit) is derived.

## Cultivation

At Kirstenbosch *Streptocarpus formosus* is one of the most reliable and beautiful plants in the collections, flowering as a pot plant in the glasshouse and doing well out in the

garden. In a mild climate like Cape Town's, the plants survive the winters outside as long as they do not get too wet. During the warm summers they are actively growing and need plenty of water, but during the cool winters very little water should be given (only when the plants are dry). Even when slightly wilted from drought, they will quickly recover with a good watering.

When planting *Streptocarpus* in the garden, prepare the soil well, especially under trees, by digging proper planting pockets and adding lots of matured compost and mulch. *Streptocarpus* needs good light but not direct sunlight: they are easily burned by sun yet reluctant to flower in deep shade. Light shade with good ventilation and temperatures around 17-25 °C are best. They respond well to feeding during summer when they are actively growing. Remove the dead leaves and flowers regularly, as this keeps the plant attractive and healthy. *Streptocarpus formosus* seem to be more resistant to most of the pests like mealy bug, slugs, white fly and fungal diseases that are often found in other species of *Streptocarpus*.

### Propagation from leaf cuttings

*Streptocarpus formosus* can easily be propagated from a single leaf. This can be done at any time of the year except midwinter. Simply break off a healthy, mature leaf. There are two methods of cutting the leaf. Place one flat on a clean, hard surface and cut it with a blade at right angles to the midrib into segments of about 4 cm. Alternatively, cut along the length of the leaf blade and remove the large central vein. Then prepare a tray with a well-drained soil medium like sand or compost and wedge the cut edges firmly into it. Water thoroughly and place the

Right Leaf cuttings of *Streptocarpus* cut in segments and placed in sand. Far right Leaf cuttings cut along the length of the leaf blade. Photos: NBI.

cuttings in a warm, humid environment out of direct sunlight and ideally (but not essential) with a bottom heat of 20-25 °C. A plastic bag can be placed over the tray to keep the humidity high. Air the cuttings regularly for a few minutes and water the soil when dry.



The long, twisted seed pods that are typical of *Streptocarpus* and from which the name (*streptos* = twisted and *carpus* = fruit) is derived. Photo: L. van der Walt.

Within a month or two the leaves will root and new little leaves will start to form along the cut edge that was placed in the rooting medium. The old leaves turn brown as the young leaves start to grow. Once the new plants are strong and well



rooted, they can be separated and potted into small pots and grown on. This vegetative propagation method will produce young plants identical to their parents. Be careful to avoid fungal attacks by using clean materials and do not keep the cuttings too cold and wet. If the leaves rot before they root, just try again.

### Propagation from seed

Sow *Streptocarpus formosus* seed during the warm spring and summer months by scattering the seeds on a moist, well-drained medium like fine compost or palm fibre. Place in a position with good light but not direct sunlight and water regularly with a fine spray - not allowing the seedlings to dry out. Germination is usually within a month. Plant the seedlings out into small pots in a well-drained medium when they are quite big and strong. Transplant again into bigger pots when the roots have filled the small pots. ♻️

### Further reading

Dibley, Rex and Gareth. 1995. *Streptocarpus, A Wisley Handbook*. Cassell, London.  
 Hilliard, O.M. and Burt, B.L. 1971. *Streptocarpus: An African plant study*. University of Natal Press, Durban

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