

Gladiolus, Kniphofia, orchids, and those funny papery-flowered things

Colin Moat

For a fortnight in February last year, a few fellow Hardy Planters and I made a stunning journey with Green Routes through the Drakensberg.

To put the seasons into context, our February is South Africa's mid- to late-summer and, if that isn't disconcerting enough, the summers are wet and the winters dry (similar to the UK, apart from the dry winters).

Whilst this article is truly about plants, you can't mention the Drakensberg without mentioning the scenery – the mountains are simply stunning. The hotels are at 3,000 feet, the mountains are up to 10,000 feet! The major difference between this and the South African West Coast spring flower tour, apart from the topography or, in fact, because of the topography, is that most of our botanical sight-seeing was on foot. On

the West Coast you only have to pull on to the hard shoulder to find half a dozen flowers that you've previously seen only in hanging baskets, or photographs, or in a lot of cases not seen at all. In the Drakensberg, you have to work for it.

The party soon settled into roughly two groups: the walkers and the wimps. At our morning meeting point, preparing to set out on our day's excursion, the NorthBerg Facehaus group did gentle warming-up exercises, jogging on the spot, 50 press-ups and so on. The rest would be checking they had their entire camera equipment, and pondering over jettisoning their waterproofs in order to cram more sandwiches into their backpacks. As my physique falls/flops into the 'built for comfort, not for speed' category, you can imagine I slumped into the second group. It was more apparent when later I looked at my photographs, as a number show a long line of people stretched out in a crocodile along the trail in front of me... Well, someone has to be last, and I did take a lot of photographs.



The Drakensberg are simply stunning

Fig. 1 *Gladiolus watermeyeri*Fig. 2 *Gladiolus crassifolius*Fig. 3 *Kniphofia laxiflora*

I was, however, driven on by my desire to experience again the sensation of surprise that so often comes with South African plants, and to re-acquaint myself with, in particular, the *Gladiolus* part of the *Iris* family. Having been seduced by the elegant and scented (yes, scented!) charm of *G. alatus* (back cover), *G. venustus* and the striking *G. watermeyeri* (fig. 1) on the West Coast, I was looking forward to seeing what the Drakensberg had to offer. I was not to see as wide a range as I had hoped for, but what there were, especially *G. crassifolius* (fig. 2) and *G. oppositiflorus*, were certainly worth finding. They are similar to *G. papilio* in habit, but slightly daintier, as the flowers are more in proportion to their slender stems. I have grown *G. papilio* (apparently introduced to the UK in 1866) and like it, but the flowers can get a little top heavy. For those of you whose experience of *Gladiolus* is the floristry sort, and who are reading this whilst waiting to be put through to the Plant Police on the grounds of ‘harmed snobbery’, I would urge you to do a Google search for some of these species, and I’m confident you’ll be pleasantly surprised.

Another plant that seems to have fallen from favour is *Kniphofia*. I can remember a lecture by Bob Brown where he was really unpleasant about them. Although I think it was the way they were used, rather than necessarily the plant themselves. I like pokers, and I grow them, with mixed success, combined with grasses, where the bulk of the grass leaves masks the fairly coarse poker leaves and their flowers add excitement and rigidity against the softness of the grass. The reason for my mixed success is that I garden on sand, and whilst

this provides good drainage for their fleshy roots over winter, having now seen them growing in their natural habitat I see what the problem is. They grow in marshland, and, if I take you back to the first paragraph, in South Africa they enjoy summer rainfall and dry winters, and whatever you and I may think, our summers aren't wet enough. We were delighted to see quite a range of them: *K. laxiflora* (fig. 3), *K. linearifolia*, *K. uvaria* and the most striking of all, *K. caulescens* (fig. 4) in a vast drift at about 8000 ft on our way up (and down) the Sani Pass to the Kingdom of Lesotho.

K. caulescens took our minds off the rather hairy trip up the unmade road to Lesotho, one hairpin bend after another. We were travelling in three 4x4 vehicles of varying vintages. Whilst I believe our driver had left school, I couldn't be certain he had received his results! There wasn't a huge amount of light conversation on our journey, though there were a few whimpers (I apologised later) when he made three attempts to get round a corner, and each time he dropped back for the run-up we got nearer the edge. It was a relief to reach the border and the top.

Lesotho could be the subject of a book; it instantly made me think National Geographic – a vast landscape with minimal human habitation, round stone huts with thatched roofs, and within seconds three lammergeier (bearded vultures) circling about half a mile above our heads.

I will mention just three of the many plants we saw in Lesotho. First, a tiny white *Dianthus basuticus* (fig. 5), (I don't know why, but I just didn't expect to see a *Dianthus* at 10,500 ft). It takes its name from



Fig. 4 *Kniphofia caulescens*



Fig. 5 *Dianthus basuticus*



Fig. 6 *Androcymbium striatum*

Fig. 7 *Satyrium longicauda*Fig. 8 *Disperis fanniniae*Fig. 9 *Disperis cooperi*

Lesotho's old name of Basutoland, for the stamp collectors amongst us (philately will get you everywhere!) Then, peeking coyly from a roadside bank was *Diascia integerrima*. Finally, a cause of great excitement, a patch of white which turned out to be a what I still know as 'colchicum' but they who must be obeyed deem to be *Androcymbium striatum* (fig. 6); it has keel-shaped white-striped green 15cm tall flowers (strictly bracts), the sight of which will stay with me for many a year.

Anyway, back on theme, I have to say over the two weeks I have never before seen the quantity of, or so many varieties of, orchid. I will add, although 'off topic', something else I have never seen so many of is eagles. They were everywhere. In addition you didn't have to be particularly 'eagle-eyed' to spot them as they seem to like perching on telegraph poles. I digress. Orchids in South Africa are not the hothouse varieties: they are tough by-the-roadside, on-the-moorland, or in-the-hills varieties, and given their numbers they can obviously compete. A good example was the very tall *Satyrium longicauda* (fig. 7), known as the Blushing Bride, which can have up to 60 white, pink-veined-and-tipped, hooded flowers up a stem over 30cm high. The moist-shade-lover *Disperis fanniniae* (fig. 8), with its bright white, flushed-pink or -green, hooded flowers with bright apple-green stems, was very pretty. Its relative *Disperis cooperi* (fig. 9) was spotted in the same marshy site as *Kniphofia caulescens*. The white, split-lipped *Brownleea parviflora* (fig.10) was also an exciting find, but the robust *Disperis oxyglossa* with its rusty brown/red acanthus-like flowers on stout

stems summed up the orchids' ability to cope with all that the elements could throw at them.

Of the 600 species of *Helichrysum* worldwide, 245 of them occur in South Africa with 102 species in the Drakensberg, making it the largest genus in the area. I knew of them only as an annual I grew half a lifetime ago, 'everlastings' as they were quaintly known. A fairly strange range of plants, but you can see how they are perfectly adapted to the climate.

Apologies for stating the obvious, but when I mentioned 'summer rain', you probably thought of a nice gentle shower. What you actually get is a monsoon-like thunderstorm with lightning and the works, so you don't get too many delicate daisy-like flowers as they would be smashed to pieces in the deluge and just rot. Instead, you get the helichrysums made of sterner stuff and able to withstand all nature throws at them. In addition, quite often they have silver, hairy foliage to cope with the sun. Whilst a good proportion of them are yellow flowered and, I don't know why, seem less interesting because of it, *Helichrysum auriceps* (fig. 11) had a flower head apparently comprised of very shiny golden ball-bearings (so shiny it made it very difficult to photograph). A number of them had a low-growing habit and were loaded with flowers. One we came across in several places was *H. adenocarpum* (fig. 12), which had either red, pink or white flowers, all looking good against its grey woolly foliage.

And finally, I can't let you go without describing the excitement, on our last walk of seeing, in pristine condition, *Asclepias macropus* (fig. 13), with a drumstick-primula head but in *Auricula*



Fig. 10 *Brownleea parviflora*



Fig. 11 *Helichrysum auriceps*



Fig. 12 *Helichrysum adenocarpum*

Fig. 13 *Asclepias macropus*Fig. 15 *Brunsvigia grandiflora*Fig. 14 *Zaluzianskyia natalensis*

colours of greeny-yellow and fawn. Just a stumble away we found the striking *Zaluzianskyia natalensis* (fig. 14), whose four petals are zingy red on the outside and pristine glossy white on the inside. However, the most impressive plant saved itself till last. We brought the airport-bound coach to a screeching halt when a flash of red, seen the previous day from the coach window, was located; it turned out to be *Brunsvigia grandiflora* (fig. 15), with its bright pink starburst flowerheads. What an encore by the Drakensberg! 🌺

Colin Moat is a longstanding member of the Kent Group and currently a Trustee of the Society. Overwhelmed by the plants in South Africa on a visit in 2004, Colin first organised a Kent Group visit, then set up Green Routes to enable Hardy Planters from all areas to enjoy a similar plant experience. He enjoys growing grasses, woodlanders and, of course, a number South Africans, *Gladiolus* and *Kniphofia* amongst others!