

A Garden of Bright Cheer with Blue Stars and Yellow Bulbine

It is easy to understand why the age-old blue /yellow colour scheme has stood the test of time; it's bright and cheerful, and so lifts the spirits. And in the combination we highlight today, as fresh as the longed-for spring rains. *Bulbine latifolia* has, in fact, anticipated the growing season and is blooming beautifully as winter wanes.

Their chosen spot is at the bottom of a slope where it levels off, and soils are damp enough to encourage the Blue Stars to seed prolifically. *Bulbine latifolia* too is satisfied with life thriving despite the cover of wild grass through summer and autumn, perhaps because it is self-seeded. This thatch has now been cleared, and new members added to the *Aristea/Bulbine* bed; *Ornithogalum juncifolium* (Grass-leaved Chinchinchee), *Alepidea amatymbica*, (Giant Alepidea), *Kniphofia pauciflora* (Dainty Poker), and the Ifafa Lily, *Cyrtanthus mackenii*. All favour damp soils and should thrive in this arranged community. We'll follow their growth through the season.

The mid- to dark green sword shaped leaves of *Aristea ecklonii* make it a lovely form plant for the perennial bed, even when not in flower. Winter through summer sees deep blue stars opening up long stalks that stand above the leaves. Its common name of Blue Stars is a perfect description of its lovely flowers. *Aristea* grows naturally in areas with reasonably good rains in forest margins and grasslands and is often found in marshy areas and wetlands. This is not to say that Blue Stars won't flower happily in a normal garden soil as long as they do receive moderate amounts of water. And they are undemanding when conditions are sufficient. This species thrives in both sun and semi-shade, although the flowers close when the light conditions are too low. Each flower opens for a single day, closing up in the mid- to late afternoon. New buds are always waiting in the wings to take over the display which continues for a few months of the year.

Cut off the odd leaf that dies off, but there is no need to cut them back. If clumps grow too large, split them during the rainy season, and plant immediately, so the light root structure does not dry out. Cut off old flowering stems.

Most gardeners and landscapers still use the name, *Bulbine natalensis*. Others, specialists included, insist *B. natalensis* and *Bulbine latifolia* are separate species, the former more of a shade specialist, the latter, found in sunny places. SANBI, though, now list only *B. latifolia* and other reliable sources indicate this name covers both! So, we treat it as such. I came across a rather intriguing common name for this plant; Water Glass, referencing the smooth, glossy leaves, I imagine. It is a succulent groundcover that forms aloe-like rosettes of long, bright yellow-green triangular leaves that taper to a sharp point. These are softly fleshy and thick, smooth to the touch and spineless. While some texts suggest *B. latifolia*

grows in full sun, many gardeners only use it in dry or slightly damp shade to partial, or semi-shade; certainly, this was where *B. natalensis* was known to grow. Here, plants retain their lush, plump texture and fresh colour. I find, too, that flowers last longer and grow a bit taller out of the hot sun. In nature, plants tuck into rock crevices, hang off cliffs, and spread beneath shade-giving thicket shrubbery. Plants thus love compost enriched soils. Make sure there is good airflow around the plants otherwise they soften and rot. If all conditions are met, the Bulbine needs little management.

Bulbine latifolia

Size: 30 cm high x 20 – 30 cm wide

Flowering season: Spring

Position: Light shade; dappled shade; partial shade

Water needs: Low to moderate

Frost: Moderate

Distribution and habitat: Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga, in thicket vegetation, dry river valleys, gorges and on cliffs

Aristea eckonii:

Size: 60 cm

Flowering season: winter; spring; autumn

Position: sun; semi-shade; partial shade

Water needs: Moderate

Frost: light

Distribution and habitat: Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga. Grows in shrubland, forest margins, stream banks, and on rocky, bare land.