A Weeping Boer-bean’s Toast to Spring

The wind blew through Gillitts on Spring Day as if to slough off the last of winter, removing old leaves that still clung on by just a thread, and wiping a few scattered rain drops across the skies as it cleaned. We’re ready for the growing season.

South Africans celebrate Arbor Week from the 1 – 7 September, and there are few trees that toast spring as spectacularly as the Weeping Boer-bean. *Schotia brachypetala* or Huilboerboon trees add character, colour, nectar, aesthetics, and function that should make it an essential plant for summer rainfall gardens.  Plus, with its flowering season beginning in the last month of winter, the *Schotia* spans that tricky time for wildlife when winter flowers die off and the spring show has yet to begin.

There is little to rival a Weeping Boer-bean in full flower. In a good year, large clusters of red to scarlet flowers mass along old branches and on old wood, quantities of nectar spilling from the cup-shaped blooms. Flowering often begins while the tree is leafless or thin of leaf in a dry year, or as the spring leaves emerge, and their glorious colour and size make an awe-inspiring sight, even from afar. They’re like a red flashing signal light to birds and insects, and it’s said the Zulu or SiSwati name, “uvovovo”, and the Tsonga name “Mvhovhovho” imitate the sound of the insect swarms that cover the flowers. Don’t let that put you off, for these insects and bird species reward you by snacking on a range of other garden insects. While many red flowering plants are tubular, a shape that caters for only a small selection of pollinators, the open *Schotia* flowers offer their nectar up to all and any interested insect and bird.

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