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FIRST FIELD GUIDE TO WILD FLOWERS OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

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Cape Restio, *Elegia thyrsifera*

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Introduction

The southern African subcontinent is a wildflower paradise. The region is home to many different kinds of plants, from small succulents[G] which survive in the harsh deserts of southern Namibia and Namaqualand, to enormous forest trees which thrive in the moist areas along the eastern coast. The region is home to more than 18 500 different species of flowering plants. As a result of this great diversity southern Africa has more plant species than any other similar sized area outside of the tropical forests of South America and Asia.

There are several reasons for the region's wonderful floral wealth. One of these is a varied landscape which provides many different growing conditions for plants. In its geography southern Africa resembles a soup-plate turned upside down. Moving inwards from a hot and humid coastal strip in the east, the land soon rises to a well-watered mountainous belt, which reaches altitudes of 3 500 metres in the Kwazulu/Natal Drakensberg. This mountain belt forms the border to a high, flat grassy plain or plateau located in the middle of the country. The climate becomes drier towards the west and the central grassy plateau gives way to the Great Karoo and Kalahari deserts. The west coast is the most arid part of the region and it is along this coast that the Namib Desert is found in Namibia.

A second reason why southern Africa is so rich in wildflowers is that it experiences two entirely different climates. Over most of the region the rains fall within the warm summer months and the winter months are dry and cold. Most plants in these summer-rainfall areas flower in the spring and summer. However, in the Western Cape and Namaqualand, the rains fall mainly during the cooler, winter months and the summer is hot and very dry. In this Mediterranean climate or winter-rainfall region many plants flower in late winter and early spring.

What are plants?

Erica nana

Most people associate plants with what they see growing in a garden bed. Technically, a plant is any living organism that produces its own food and contains cellulose in its cell walls. Scientists classify plants into a kingdom that includes all mosses, ferns, cone-bearing plants, flowering plants and trees. Algae and fungi, although once grouped with plants and often plant-like in appearance, form kingdoms of their own.

Most plants are green in colour and produce their own food using sunlight. They grow almost everywhere and are made up of several organs or structures known as roots, stems, leaves and flowers, each of which performs a specific function in the plant.

Roots The roots anchor the plant in the soil and absorb minerals and water from the soil. Some roots are swollen to allow for the storage of food in the form of starch e.g. carrots or potatoes. Roots may be branched (adventitious) or single and tapering (taproots), or swollen as in tubers.

Stems The stem supports the leaves, flowers and fruit of the plant. Stems may be branched or unbranched and are usually rigid and upright. Some stems may be creeping or climbing, however,

Water-Lily, *Nymphaea nouchali*