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Gonialoe variegata | Plantz Africa

Introduction

This plant was previously called *Aloe variegata*. *Gonialoe variegata* is one of the best known, and most distinctive of the South African aloes. The characteristic white spots on the leaf surfaces are most attractive and resemble the spots on a partridge's breast, hence the common name.



Description

Description

Gonialoe variegata is classified as a dwarf aloe and is grouped together with various other aloes that reach a height of no more than 250 mm. Plants may be found as solitary individuals but are most commonly encountered in small groups of up to 7 or 8 plants which form dense rosettes through underground suckers.

The leaves are lanceolate-deltoid, about 150-200 mm long, and are arranged in three ranks of 6-8 leaves each, have a ridge or keel along the lower surface and are without spines or prickles. On occasions the leaves form a very attractive spiral twist as the plant ages. The leaf colour may be variable depending on the habitat and climatic conditions: deep green in good years or chocolate brown when plants have experienced drought stress. White markings, spots or blotches that form irregular transverse bands, decorate both surfaces of the densely overlapping leaves. The leaf margins have closely spaced small teeth along a white horny edge.



The inflorescence is a raceme and is mostly branched with hanging flowers that are quite abundant and beautiful after good rains. Flowers may vary from a flesh-pink to dull red, rarely yellow. Flowers are 35-45 mm long and flowering time is July to September.

As with other members of the *Aspodelaceae*, the fruit is a capsule that splits into three when ripe. Seeds are typically winged,

small, up to 3 mm, and produced in abundance. Seeds ripen normally around September to November.

Conservation Status

Status

Gonialoe variegata is not threatened, primarily due to its relatively established and wide distribution.

Distribution and habitat

Distribution description

Gonialoe variegata is found over large areas in the arid or semi-arid regions of South Africa and in the southern parts of Namibia. In South Africa it occurs in the karroid areas of the southwestern Free State, southern and central portions of the Western Cape (Great Karoo and Little Karoo), as well as Namaqualand. Plants are found mostly in groups, in partial shade among low karoo bush, generally in hard ground, in rocky crevices or in between rocks. but may also be found in sandy areas where soils are generally derived from quartzite-sandstone, granites, mudstone, dolerite or shales. The associated vegetation is predominantly the Namaqualand and Succulent Karoo veld of South Africa.



Derivation of name and historical aspects

History

The genus name *Aloe* is derived from the Arabic, *alloch* and translated as *allal* in Greek and Hebrew, literally meaning 'bitter' or 'bitter sap' which is descriptive of aloe sap. The specific epithet *variegata* is Latin and means 'irregularly spotted', referring to the attractive spotted bands on the leaf surfaces. The common Afrikaans name *kanniedood* when translated to English means 'cannot die', and refers to the plant's ability to survive for a number of years without water.

Gonialoe variegata was first found by Simon Van Der Stel's expedition to Namaqualand on 16 October 1685, in the vicinity of Copperberg in the Springbok District of the Northern Cape. The first illustration of the plant was made by Claudius in Van Der Stel's journal which was never published. The first published figure of *A. variegata* was that in Pere Tachard's *Second voyage de Siam* in 1689 in the Paris edition, and is also the first published of any South African aloe (Reynolds 1950). *A. variegata* was one of the species grown in the Dutch East India Company's garden in Cape Town in 1695. It was and probably still is the most popular aloe grown in the temperate climates of Europe and the UK, especially in greenhouses, on suburban windowsills and in the dusty windows of pubs (Smith & Van Wyk 2008).

It can be distinguished from the related and exclusively Namibian *G. dinteri* and *G. sladeniana* by the fact that it is a much more robust plant in all respects and it also bears more densely flowered racemes.

Ecology

Ecology

Gonialoe variegata produces nectar and is therefore pollinated by sugarbirds as well as winged and crawling insects such as

ants which are small enough to enter the flower tube in which the nectar is stored. It is quite remarkable how large the inflorescence can be, compared to the size of the plant. In habitat, this is particularly noticeable when the small plant advertises itself by its bright flowers that tower out of the small bushes in which it shelters. Without the flowers, it would be a very difficult task to find the plants, as the mottled appearance of the leaves ensures an almost perfect camouflage in the karroid veld. After fertilization, the fruits, grow quickly and split into 3 parts in spring and summer. The seeds are small, up to 4mm and slightly winged enabling it to be dispersed by the wind. The plant in itself is very tough and can survive for several seasons without water, at which point the leaves turn brown to reddish, a sign generally associated with stress. *G. variegata* is not known to be eaten by many animals except occasionally by rock hyrax, porcupine, and hare.

Uses

Use

No medicinal uses are recorded for *Gonialoe variegata*. Many beliefs are attached to this delightful species which was described as early as 1658. It is said that some indigenous people to this day, hang plants inside the huts of young women and if the plant flowers, this indicates that the women is fertile and will have many children-the plant will flower although not in the ground or cared for, hence its name, *kannie dood*.. Plants are also planted on graves in the belief that it will lead to eternal life. There is no doubt that *Aloe variegata* is a very attractive plant for garden and container planting. Once established, it lasts for many years with little care.



Growing Gonialoe variegata

Grow

Gonialoe variegata is best grown from seeds. Seeds must be sown as fresh as possible. When kept too long they are parasitized by small crawling insects. The best time for sowing is in the summer from October to December. Use coarse river sand and cover seeds lightly, then keep moist. It is advisable to treat seeds with a long-lasting fungicide, as seedlings are prone to damping off, a fungus that eventually kills the young plants. Simply shake seeds in a container with some fungicide.

After germination, when plants are about 20-30 mm high plant out using a sandy loam medium and feed with an organic-based fertilizer at least once a month to ensure healthy growth. If you have a garden with clay soil, use some agricultural lime and bonemeal to break up and nourish the soil. Mature plants in cultivation may at times be subjected to attack from scale and aphids. For scale, an oil-based solution can be used, even soap water has proven effective against scale. Contact insecticides for insects usually work well but in heavy infestations, a systemic application may be necessary. All known garden pests can be kept to a minimum by simply ensuring optimal growing conditions and healthy plants.

Remember that *Gonialoe variegata* is adapted to arid and semi-arid conditions. It is thus very easy to kill plants through overwatering and poor drainage.

Companion plants to *Gonialoe variegata* include *A. aristata*, *A. bowiea*, *A. brevifolia*, *A. humilis*, *A. longistyla*, *A. claviflora*, *A. falcata*, *G. dinteri* and *G. sladeniana*. Other additions to consider are [Lampranthus multiradiatus](#), [L. aureus](#), [Pelargonium](#)

[echinatum](#), *P. xerophytum*, *P. spinosum*, *P. sericifolia*, [P. crithmifolium](#), *Stoeberia arborescens*, *Gazania krebsiana*, *Hermannia saccifera*, *Lampranthus reptans* and [Oscularia deltoides](#). A smallish rock garden that provides some shelter, provides the best growing conditions.

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Credits

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