



# Dierama pulcherrimum

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## *Dierama pulcherrimum* (Hook.f.) Baker

**Family:** Iridaceae

**Common names:** Amathole hairbell, East London hairbell, African hairbell, angel's fishing rod, fairy wand, wedding bell (Eng.); grasklokkies (Afr.)



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This large, elegant geophyte makes a striking garden display with its graceful, arching stems and delicate pendulous bell-shaped flowers that dance in the breeze. It is fully frost hardy and perfect for summer-rainfall rock gardens or next to ponds.



© Michelle Griffiths

### Description

*Dierama pulcherrimum* is an evergreen perennial with flowering stems up to 1.8 m tall. Plants grow from corms 30–40 mm in diameter. The stems are either single, or a few tufted together in small clumps. The numerous, more or less linear leaves are shorter than the flowering stems, measuring 500–900 x 4–11 mm. Plants flower mainly in midsummer, between December and February. Light to dark magenta-pink or deep purple-red flowers are usually clustered together in long slender pendulous spikes. Common names of the species such as wedding bell, fairy wand and *grasklokkies* allude to the delicate, graceful nature of the inflorescences. The brownish bracts are lanceolate to elliptic-obovate, 23–34 x 10–14 mm. The ovoid flowers are 35–54 mm long, with tubes 10–14(–15.5) mm long and tepals 23–35(–39) x 10–19 mm.



### Plant Attributes:

**Plant Type:** Bulb

**SA Distribution:** Eastern Cape

**Soil type:** Sandy, Loam

**Flowering season:** Early Summer, Late Summer

**PH:** Acid, Neutral

**Flower colour:** Pink

**Aspect:** Full Sun

**Gardening skill:** Average

### Special Features:

Feature plant

### Horticultural zones

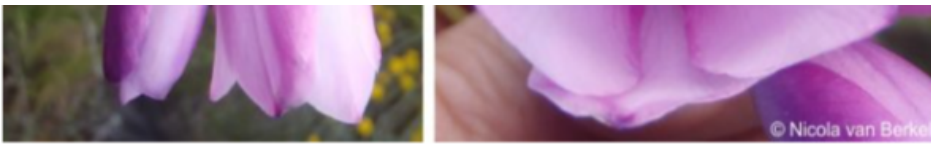


Zone 1 Coastal summer rainfall, frost free

Zone 2 Coastal winter rainfall, frost free

Zone 4 Summer rainfall Karoo and Highveld, Frost in winter

Zone 5 Bushveld summer rainfall, Light frost



*Dierama pulcherrimum* is easily confused with *D. pendulum* but living plants can be distinguished by their ovoid flowers with suberect or weakly spreading tepals. *Dierama pendulum* has funnel-shaped flowers with widely flaring tepals. *Dierama pulcherrimum* occurs east of Makhanda (previously Grahamstown) and *D. pendulum* west of Makhanda.



#### Conservation Status

This species is assessed as Least Concern (LC) in the [Red List of South African Plants](#). It is widespread with a stable population trend and has no known threats.

#### Distribution and habitat

*Dierama pulcherrimum* is a South African endemic occurring in the Eastern Cape. It is found in open grassland between Baziya mountain near Engcobo and the Amathole Mountains at elevations of  $\pm$  900–1 700 m.



#### Derivation of name and historical aspects

*Dierama* is part of the large and diverse Iridaceae family which has approximately 1 800 species in about 65 genera worldwide. The family is named after the genus *Iris*, derived from the Greek word for 'iridescent, referring to the rainbow-like colours found in many species. The family is particularly well represented in southern Africa with numerous endemic genera and is an important horticultural family globally, with many species cultivated for their showy flowers.

*Dierama* is endemic to southern and eastern Africa and has approximately 45 accepted species of which 37 species occur in southern Africa. The genus extends from South Africa northwards through the highlands of tropical Africa to Ethiopia.

The genus name *Dierama* is derived from the ancient Greek word *dierama*, meaning funnel and refers to the shape of the flowers. The name was established by botanist K. Koch in 1855. The specific epithet *pulcherrimum* comes from the Latin

flowers. The name was established by botanist R. Hooker in 1866. The specific epithet *pulcherrimum* comes from the Latin word *pulcher*, meaning beautiful and relates to the beautiful flowers. All the common names of the species e.g. hairbells, *grasklokkies* (meaning grass bell or flowering grass), wedding bell, angel's fishing rod, refer to the delicate, bell-shaped flowers hanging on hair-like stalks from slender, flexible stems.

This species was first described by Joseph Dalton Hooker in 1866 as *Sparaxis pulcherrima* and in 1877 was transferred to *Dierama* by J.G. Baker. *Dierama pulcherrimum* was introduced to Britain by the famous Yorkshire nursery firm of Backhouse. James Backhouse the elder had travelled in South Africa on behalf of the Society of Friends and collected this species for introduction in Britain. The plant was introduced and flowered successfully at Kew and was illustrated in Curtis's Botanical Magazine in 1866. It has been widely cultivated in Britain since then and remains popular in gardens.



### Ecology

*Dierama* species are usually pollinated by solitary bees that forage for nectar and pollen. The flowers are also visited by crab spiders which lie in wait for pollinating insects. Cases of self-fertilisation have been recorded in cultivated *D. pulcherrimum* plants and the species is known to set seed freely. *Dierama* species are easily grown from seed, and natural variation in flower colour exists within species, so that seedlings may not be identical to parent plants even without cross-pollination. Seeds are dispersed in the near vicinity of the parent plant when the capsules split open and the long slender stems are whipped in the wind.

*Dierama pulcherrimum* may possibly hybridise with *D. igneum* in the Hogsback area, and dark red-flowered forms of *D. pulcherrimum* with the dark-flowered *Dierama atrum* (Dohne, Stutterheim, Pirie and King William's Town) and *D. reynoldsii* (Baziya-Engcobo) where they occur sympatrically.

### Uses

*Dierama pulcherrimum* has been used as an ornamental plant since the 19th century. It is a popular garden plant in countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia. It is important to note that *D. pulcherrimum* is often confused with *D. pendulum* in the nursery trade and these two species might hybridise in cultivation.

No uses have been recorded for *D. pulcherrimum*, but the corms of other *Dierama* species like *D. pendulum* and *D. robustum* are used as medicines by the Southern Sotho people of Lesotho. The corms are prepared as a decoction (a liquid preparation) and used as an enema that has strongly purgative properties.



### Growing *Dierama pulcherrimum*

This elegant plant, with long slender stems and pendulous flowers, makes an excellent addition to gardens. The thin flexible stems never stand still, even on a calm day the bell-shaped flowers wave and dance in the lightest breeze. This continuous graceful movement attracts attention in any part of the garden where they are planted. *Dierama pulcherrimum*

continuous graceful movement attracts attention in any part of the garden where they are planted. *Dierama pulcherrimum* is particularly well suited to flowerbeds near ponds or streams where the graceful, arching stems can overhang the water. They are also well suited for rock gardens or large containers. Grow plants in groups for maximum impact but avoid mixing with other species as competition from close neighbours is detrimental. Once established, plants are long-lived, with evidence from Edinburgh of clumps persisting for over 25 years.

Plants are evergreen and flower in midsummer, between December and February. As a South African summer-rainfall plant it requires sufficient moisture throughout the summer and is not suited to hot, dry borders. In winter-rainfall areas, supplementary watering during the summer will be necessary to maintain healthy growth. Plants are fully frost hardy and can tolerate temperatures down to about  $-10^{\circ}\text{C}$ .

Propagate *D. pulcherrimum* from seed or by division of corms. Sow fresh seed in spring in a well-drained potting mix. Cover seeds lightly and keep moist until germination occurs. Transplant seedlings once they are large enough to handle but take care not to disturb the roots excessively as *Dierama* species resent root disturbance. Plants grown from seed typically take several years to reach flowering size.

For propagation via corms, carefully divide corms during the dormant winter period. *Dierama pulcherrimum* strongly resents being disturbed and if transplanted, can take months, sometimes up to a year, to re-establish. During this period the foliage may die away and the plant appears to be dead, but with patience, leaves will eventually reappear and the plant will recover. When dividing, separate the cormlets from the parent corm and replant immediately. Do not allow the corms to dry out. Plant corms in the spring.

*Dierama pulcherrimum* prefers acidic to neutral, humus-rich and well-drained soil. It can also grow in sandy, loamy or chalky soils, but good drainage is essential. Choose a position in full sun for best flowering. Water regularly during the growing season from spring through to autumn to keep the soil moist. Fertilization is beneficial to ensure robust growth and prolific flowering. Apply well-rotted organic matter at planting and a balanced or high-phosphorus fertilizer once in early spring to established plants.

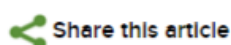
This species is generally pest-free when grown in well-drained conditions. The main pest in the species' native habitat is the bruchid beetle (*Urodon lili*), which burrows into developing seeds and destroys them. This beetle also attacks other genera in the Iridaceae family. In cultivation, good horticultural practices and proper drainage help prevent most problems.

## References

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