

## *Pseudogaltonia clavata* (Mast.) E. Phillips

**Family:** Hyacinthaceae

**Common names:** desert coconut, desert hyacinth, osonanga lily, Namibian slangkop, Cape hyacinth, (Eng.); gifbol, groentelie, slangkop, Namibia-slangkop (Afr.)



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The desert coconut (*Pseudogaltonia clavata*) is an impressive bulbous plant with tall spikes of drooping greenish white flowers, which add architectural interest to summer gardens. Its adaptation to arid climates makes it an excellent choice for sunny rock garden pockets in frost-free areas or large containers.



Fig.1. *Pseudogaltonia clavata* plants flowering in habitat.

### Description

*Pseudogaltonia clavata* is a deciduous perennial with tuberous roots that grows 0.4–1.3 m tall. The large, ovoid bulb is particularly impressive, measuring up to 220 mm long and 170 mm in diameter, with a distinctive fibrous outer coat and sturdy neck that resembles a coconut. Stiff red-brown hairs are present at the base. Each bulb produces about nine erect, lance-shaped leaves arranged in a rosette. The leaves are grey-green and leathery, at least 300 mm long and up to 90 mm wide at the base, with pointed tips and many parallel veins.



Fig.2. The distinctive bulb of *Pseudogaltonia clavata*, which gave rise to its common name, desert coconut.

### Plant Attributes:

**Plant Type:** Bulb  
**SA Distribution:** Northern Cape  
**Soil type:** Sandy, Loam  
**Flowering season:** Early Summer, Late Summer  
**PH:**  
**Flower colour:** White  
**Aspect:** Full Sun  
**Gardening skill:** Average

### Special Features:

- Drought resistant
- Feature plant
- Good potplant
- Poisonous

### Horticultural zones



Zone 3 Winter rainfall  
Karoo, light frost  
Zone 5 Bushveld summer  
rainfall, Light frost

Plants flower in midsummer (December and January). The flower stalk is rounded and smooth, about 240 mm long, bearing numerous flowers arranged in a raceme. Small, narrow, pointed bracts 10–20 mm long, appear at the base of each flower stalk that measures 22–27 mm long. The flowers are initially club-shaped in bud, becoming slightly curved when fully open and reaching 30–50 mm in length. Each tubular flower is white to cream with green bands, slightly swollen at the base. The flower tube is 10–90 mm long and 5 mm wide, with segments that are oblong with rounded tips, 10–20 mm long and 6 mm wide. The fruit is a three-chambered capsule.



Fig.3. *Pseudogaltonia clavata* inflorescence and a close-up of the flowers, of a cultivated plant in Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden.

*Pseudogaltonia clavata* is easily distinguished from the only other species in the genus, *P. liliiflora*, by its smaller bracts and pendent flowers. Although both species share robust, dense racemes of pale, greenish white tubular flowers, *P. liliiflora* has distinctive horizontally-spreading flowers that curve sharply upward at the tips, with upward-facing flower tubes.

#### Conservation Status

*Pseudogaltonia clavata* is currently assessed as Least Concern (LC) on the [Red List of South African Plants](#). The species was not selected in any one of four screening processes for highlighting potential taxa of conservation concern for detailed assessment and was hence given an automated status of Least Concern.



Fig.4. *Pseudogaltonia clavata* in its natural habitat, Karas Region, Namibia.

#### Distribution and habitat

*Pseudogaltonia clavata* is endemic to southern Africa, ranging from the northern Richtersveld Region of South Africa to Namibia, Botswana and Angola. It typically grows in arid regions, favouring well-drained, sandy or rocky soils in fynbos and renosterveld vegetation types. The species is often found in mountainous areas, on rocky slopes and in ravines.



Fig.5. *Pseudogaltonia clavata* in its natural habitat, Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park.

#### Derivation of name and historical aspects

The genus *Pseudogaltonia* is a small genus of two species endemic to the arid regions of southern Africa, ranging from the Richtersveld through Namibia to Botswana and Angola. *Pseudogaltonia* belongs to the family Hyacinthaceae, which comprises 700–900 species of bulbous plants with centers of diversity in both southern Africa and the Mediterranean Region. The Hyacinthaceae is considered an important horticultural family. Many members of this family are also significant in traditional medicine, and some are highly toxic. Within Hyacinthaceae, *Pseudogaltonia* is placed in the subfamily Ornithogaloideae, which includes about 300 species. Some modern classification systems include Hyacinthaceae within the broader family Asparagaceae as subfamily Scilloideae, though it is traditionally recognized as a distinct family.

*Pseudogaltonia clavata* was first described as *Galtonia clavata* by Maxwell T. Masters in *The Gardener's Chronicle* in 1884. The species has been the subject of several taxonomic revisions and has undergone numerous name changes, being variously known as *Lindneria clavata*, *Ornithogalum clavatum* and *Hyacinthus pechuelli*, among others. The most recent treatment recognizes it in the genus *Pseudogaltonia*, where it is distinguished from the related genus *Galtonia* by its curved perianth tube with exerted stamens, compared to the straight perianth tube with included stamens of *Galtonia*.

The genus name *Pseudogaltonia* means 'false *Galtonia*', referring to its superficial resemblance to the genus *Galtonia*. The specific epithet *clavata* comes from Latin, meaning 'club-shaped', referring to the shape of the flowers in bud.



Fig.6. The empty fruit capsules of *Pseudogaltonia clavata*.

## Ecology

*Pseudogaltonia clavata* has adapted to survive in extremely harsh conditions by remaining dormant through severe droughts that can span many years. Like many members of the Hyacinthaceae, all parts of the plant are highly toxic.

## Uses

While no specific cultural uses have been documented for *Pseudogaltonia clavata*, the Hyacinthaceae family includes many important horticultural plants, such as the garden hyacinths (*Hyacinthus*), bluebells (*Scilla*) and chinkerinchees (*Ornithogalum*). A closely related genus, *Galtonia*, is popular in gardens, particularly *G. candicans*, known as the summer hyacinth, which produces tall spikes of pendent white flowers.

## Growing *Pseudogaltonia clavata*

*Pseudogaltonia clavata* is well-suited to cultivation in large containers or rock garden pockets. These impressive plants grow in spring and summer, flower in midsummer, and are dormant during winter. The white to cream flowers open sequentially up the tall spike, creating an architectural display that lasts several weeks. While not commonly available in cultivation, its striking coconut-like bulb and impressive flower spikes make it a rewarding plant for warm, sunny gardens.

Propagate *P. clavata* from bulbs or seeds. Bulbs might be difficult to obtain as offsets are seldom formed. Plant bulbs in spring in well-drained soil with the top third exposed. A suitable growing medium consists of two parts coarse river sand or grit, one part loam, and one part finely sifted compost or finely milled bark. Pots should be at least 25–30 cm in diameter to accommodate the large bulbs, which can grow up to 15 cm in diameter. Sow seeds thinly in spring in deep seed trays or pots and keep them warm. Fresh seeds germinate easily within three weeks. This species has a remarkably long juvenile period, taking at least five years to flower under ideal conditions. Apply liquid seaweed fertilizer monthly to help seedlings reach maturity faster, but discontinue once flowering size is reached, as this can result in luxuriant leaf growth at the expense of flowers. Allow seedlings to establish themselves for three years before being planted into permanent containers or into the garden. Once established, the bulbs like to remain undisturbed for many years.

During the growing season (spring to late autumn), water thoroughly at weekly intervals. Reduce watering as the leaves die back and maintain an absolutely dry winter dormant period. To break winter dormancy, keep bulbs warm and water them only when new growth appears. Coming from arid regions of southern Africa, *P. clavata* requires not only full sun but also warm temperatures for optimal growth and flowering. While it can withstand temperatures down to 5°C, warmer conditions significantly enhance growth and reduce the time to flowering.

While the leaves and flowers are rarely troubled by insect pests, the bulbs are susceptible to fungal rot if not kept dry during winter dormancy. Plants grown in containers can be moved to a warm, protected position during winter to control moisture levels.

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