

ERICA RAINBOW



Erica vestita, Tradouw Pass



Erica cerinthoides

Stuck in the corner of many a florists and garden centre will be a rather dismal pot or two of 'Cape Heath', usually a non-descript plant with bobby pink flowers. This is a truly poor representation of these diverse and colourful plants, which exist in their fynbos home in a kaleidoscope of colours and wealth different forms. Perhaps surprisingly, *Erica* actually evolved in the northern hemisphere where there are relatively few (pink or white) species, before subsequently migrating south and finding the Mediterranean climate of the Western Cape of South Africa much to their liking and there followed explosive speciation. In the Western Cape, they are primarily plants of fynbos, a type of vegetation largely confined to this Mediterranean-climate region. This ultra-diverse vegetation occurs on ancient sandstones and granites with very low nutrient levels and is it regularly swept by bush fires that periodically reinvigorate the flora.

I'm not suggesting you need to set fire to your garden to grow these plants, that's just how they live in the wild. There was a time when hundreds of species were grown (back in the nineteenth century) and although there has been a recent resurgence of sorts with new hybrids entering cultivation, they are far from mainstream. No doubt their need for sunshine and dry summers has dented their potential in the UK at least. But, visit South Africa and your eyes will be opened. As for when, many *Erica* can be found in flower year-round, others are distinctly seasonal. But



Erica discolor red form



Erica cameronii



Erica grandiflora



Erica atrovinosa



Erica massonii



Erica urna-viridis

whatever time your visit there will be some in flower. My most recent visit in March was very good with dozens of species. Late spring and summer are productive too (October-January).

With such richness, summing up is tricky, and I'm not about to go into the nitty-gritty of their classification, so instead I'll do it loosely based on colour. The presence of pollinating birds and a butterfly (Pride of Table Mountain), means there are a number of fiery coloured heaths. The dimensions of the flowers in all colours vary widely, from long-tubed lovelies such as *Erica vestita* and *E. discolor* (shown growing together on the Tradouw Pass) and the widespread *E. cerinthoides*, which often shows up best in areas that have recently burned. For those that know Cape Town you can see Lion's Head in the background on this photo. Another warm-toned beauty is *E. grandiflora* and the Western Cape is believed to have upwards of 660 species of *Erica*, maybe 700. It is the refined niches, varied altitudes and the mosaic of habitats (with fynbos broken up by bands of fertile renosterveld) that encourages this extreme speciation. Many species are confined to individual mountains or hillsides. One example is the rare *E. cameronii*, which I saw on the rugged Waihoek mountain, growing alongside the even rarer *E. atrovinosa* and species with delightful inflated purple flowers.

Extraordinary flower design is found throughout the



Erica sessiliflora



Erica coccinea

genus, in response to pollinators and relationships that have developed over a long period of time. Take the soft, woolly stems of *E. massonii* on top of which we find glossy red-tubed flowers with green tips, or the inflated green flowers of *E. urna-viridis*. The former grew on Kogelberg alongside an array of other species such as long-tubed white *E. thomii* and pink *E. coriifolia*. In fact, it is not at all unusual to find several species growing together in close proximity. When stalking the fynbos in search of flowers one has to cover every square metre. It's one thing reading about how many heaths occur in the 'Cape', but it becomes more real when one does encounter such richness. Near Napier, the greenish tubes of *E. sessiliflora* grew within metres of three pink species, including inflated *E. irbyana*. Just along the track were thick stands of *E. coccinea* festooned in yellow flowers, the anthers strongly exerted. Other species adopt a similar appearance such as *E. plukenetii* which may be pink, yellow or white as they were at Napier alongside *E. viscaria* and half a dozen species we have yet to identify. A little higher up in the same area grew the remarkable *E. grisbrookii*, a slender shrub with adpressed leaves, white flowers and creamy buds. *E. monsonii* is another ivory gem and this one grew with the vibrant gold of *E. parilis* and the pendant flowers of *Gladiolus patersoniae* amidst



Erica grisbrookii



Erica lutea



Erica plukenetii white form



Erica monsonii



Erica parilis



Erica thomii



Erica mammosa white form



Erica mammosa pink form



Erica nudiflora

magnificent stands of *Protea eximia* in October near Touwsriver.

As might be expected there is an array of yellows, from *E. parilis* and softer toned *E. lutea*, here floriferous on Table Mountain near blue disas in March to *E. coccinea* or long-tubed *E. pinea*. However, the most common colour by far is pink, with it has to be said a confusion of small flowers species (*E. nudiflora* and *E. hirtiflora* are examples). Unravelling these takes a bit of time (or help). Regardless of what they are they do create a haze of gentle colour in the fynbos in summer, often mingled among leucodendrons, proteas and bronzy restios - those quintessential grass-like plants that are such a feature in fynbos (and still used for traditional thatching). As might be expected the pinks cover just about every form imaginable from long-tubed *E. viscaria* subsp. *longifolia* or *E. mammosa*, which also has a lovely white form common near Cape Point, glossy *E. abietina*, which can also be red as can *E. discolor*. Quite a few species have variable coloration, as if being one flowery delight is not enough.

This only adds to slightly dizzying experience of *Erica* and the fynbos in general, where even the most seasoned northern botanist is swiftly humbled about how little he or she knows of the plants around them.



Erica irbyana



Erica plukenetii



Erica abietina



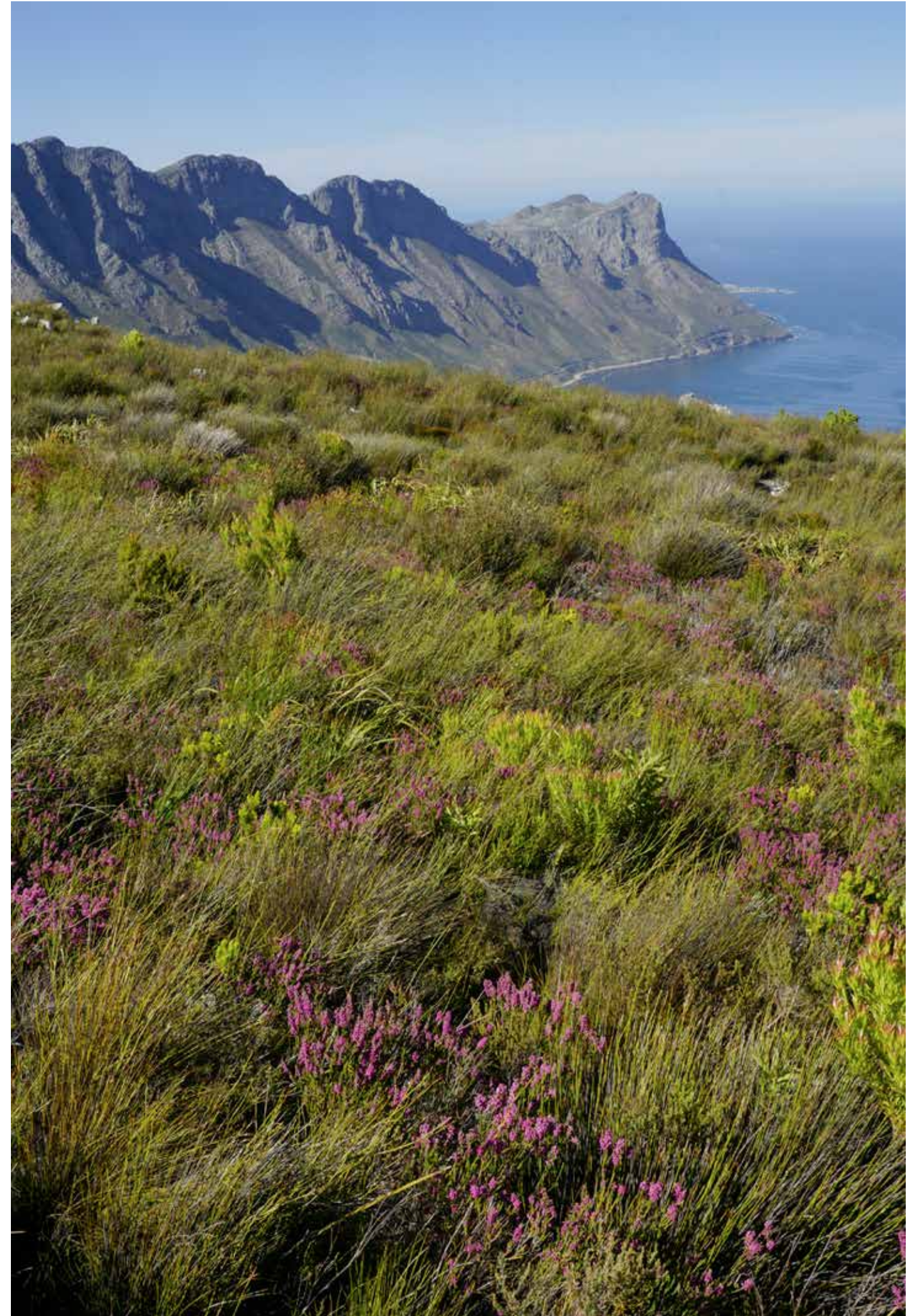
Erica viscaria subsp. *longiflora*



Erica hirtiflora



Erica corifloia



Erica sp in fynbos on Kogelberg in January.