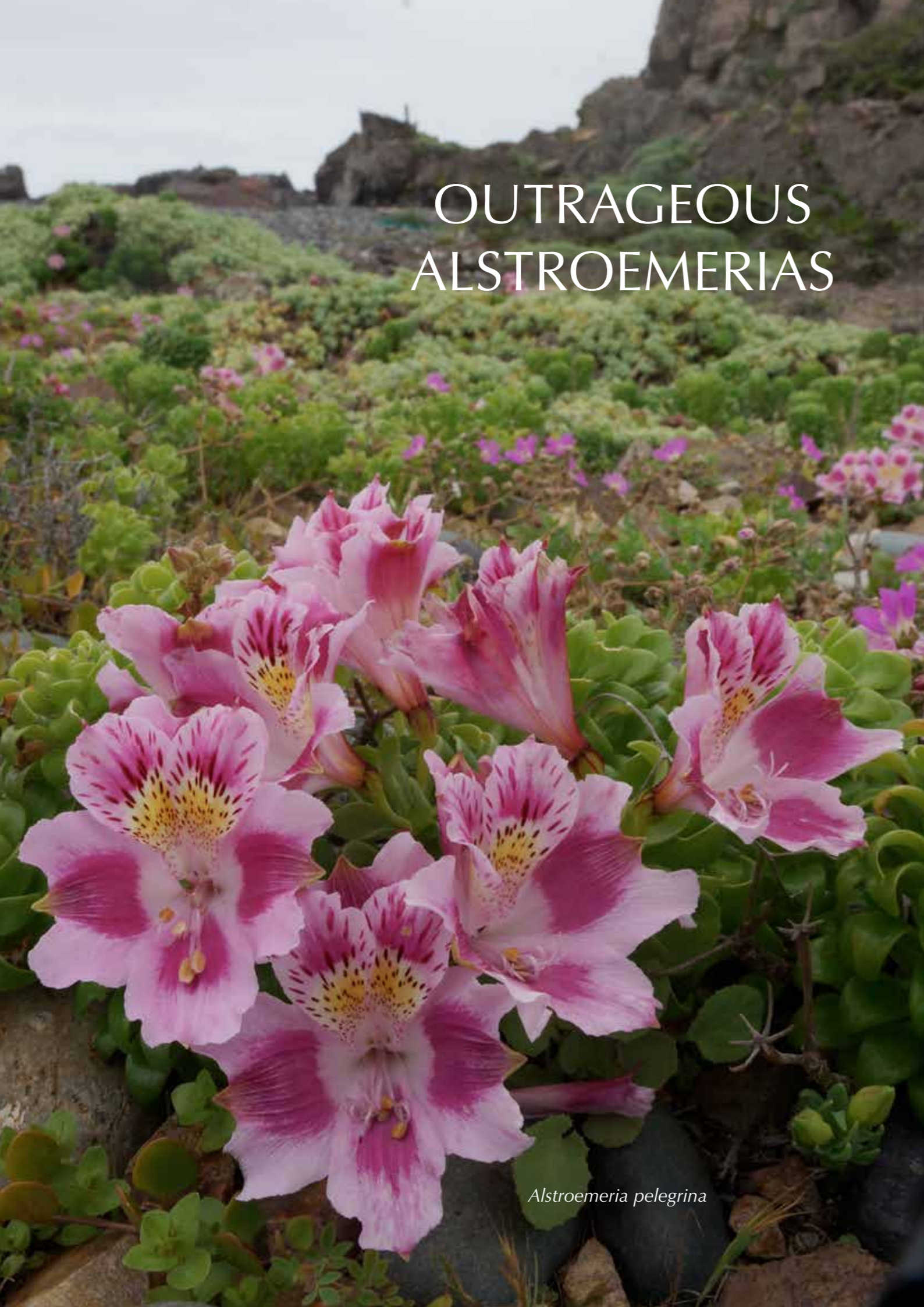


OUTRAGEOUS ALSTROEMERIAS



Alstroemeria pelegrina



Alstroemeria diluta



Cistanthe grandiflora

They are not subtle flowers; indeed, give them half a chance and they'll take over your herbaceous border if they take a liking to it. However, Alstroemeria need their vigour and when you see the places, they call home you understand better why. Our typical garden forms are derived from two species from southern Chile; *ligtu* and *aurea*, Although the south produces unbelievably quantities of these showy flowers, especially in January when woodlands are quite literally carpeted in countless pink or orange flowers, there is a much greater richness in the north. *A. ligtu* is a Mediterranean climate species, as is the very different and delicate *A. zoellneri*, a localised gem from just north of Santiago near La Campana. In the same area one can find *A. pulchra* in its various colour forms too and along the coast the much shorter *A. hookeri*, mingling with the peculiar early-flowering green orchid *Bipinnula fimbriata*. These will all be in fully flower in November as with the majority of northern species.

Moving north, the coast becomes more indented, and shrubby matorral takes over from taller sclerophyll trees. On a small area of rugged coastal strip near the town of Los Molles lives the first species ever introduced to Europe; *Alstroemeria pelegrina* (and it is one that has



Alstroemeria zoellneri



Alstroemeria magnifica

Puya chilensis

been utilised in breeding to add a bit more vigour and flamboyance if that was needed). This is one tough plant, growing naturally and receiving the full brunt of salt spray, alongside stands of magenta *Cistanthe grandiflora* and some equally hardy cacti. The leaves are tough and waxy, the flowers appear almost plastic, but they are very real and one of the most outrageous species to be encountered.

The two heartlands of the genus, are south-eastern Brazil (with tender species often from more humid climates that have been used to produce the various floristry alstroemerias) and Chile, especially northern Chile. And, as with their southern Chilean counterparts, if the rain is plentiful, they appear in great stands of fabulous blooms, for example bursting out from among stands of ultra-spiny *Puya* in the case of *A. magnifica*, one of the loveliest of all. Regardless of rainfall this beautiful flower can always be found in spring on windward passes that receive the frequent fogs generated by the cold Humboldt Current that runs along the coast. Some of these passes are so fog-prone that the many cacti that also grow here are encrusted in a thick coating of lichen (sometimes a vivid

orange, making them appear as though they are rusted). In a good year *A. magnifica* will share the matorral with *Leucocoryne purpurea*, orchids such as *Chloraea bletioides* and crocus-like *Calydorea xiphioides*, as tumbles of *Calceolaria verbascifolia* brighten the fearsome *Puya chilensis*. This very large terrestrial bromeliad is a matorral classic and in good years (for their flowering is erratic) they put forth fantastic chartreus spires of flowers, eagerly attended by several species of pollinating birds that invariably colour their crowns in bright orange pollen and give the impression they are an exciting new species.

The inner petals of *Alstroemeria* typically have bold markings, to attract and guide pollinators, though this has been largely done away with in the case of *A. schizanthoides* and larger *A. leporina*. Both hail from hot, dry hills between La Serena and Vallenar, where the drier end of Mediterranean Chile yields to the southern Atacama Desert. Sandy flats closer to the coast and on the way into the remarkable Fray Jorge national park have plentiful *A. diluta* and peachy yellow species that is sometimes popping up next gaudy yellow *Rhodophiala bagnoldii*. It



Alstroemeria schizanthoides



Alstroemeria magnifica



Alstroemeria werdermanniana



Alstroemeria kingii



Alstroemeria leporina

has a very similar relative; *A. kingii* in the drier coastal areas of Llanos de Challe, which appears among the spiny domes of cacti. Sand dunes have the pretty, slender flowers of *A. werdermanniana* too and it's a desperate year indeed when at least a few sulphurous *Rhodophiala bagnoldii* are not found in the deep sands amid mounds of pink *Frankenia chilensis*. This wonderful area is also one of the premier places to see cacti in Chile with some magnificent populations of *Copiapoa* and *Eulychnia*, sometimes draped in the lilac of *A. violacea*, very much a species that appears in the infrequent years of good rain in the desert. Its gaudy vermilion cousin, *Bomarea ovallei*, will only put its long trailing stems above ground in El Nino years with lots of rain.

And yet, although the rains bring an extra bounty it is rare that the majority of species featured here cannot be found, so tough and resourceful they are, they find a way to flower even in lean years and bring a sparkle to the ochre-and-tan hills and deserts.

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Alstroemeria violacea

