

Don't cut that 'grass'

Cape Town's precious lowland remnants need more formal recognition and protection



Spring flowers with encroaching Kikuyu grass in the background, St John Street. Photo: Karen Marais.

by **Karen Marais, Bellville** and **Gavin W. Maneveldt, University of the Western Cape**

Have you ever noticed the abundance of wildflowers on public open spaces during spring in Cape Town? I suppose some Capetonians would be aware of Rondebosch Common and the astonishing botanical diversity it contains, including many threatened species. However, it appears that very few people are aware of the many other public open spaces that may be just as precious and put on a spectacular spring flower show. But for how much longer?

From a botanical perspective, Cape Town is truly a special place. The Western Cape contains the smallest of only six plant biomes in the world, namely the Fynbos Biome. Unfortunately, while Cape Town and its surroundings are famous for its floral diversity, it is also reported to be the place with the second highest rate of plant extinctions on earth!

South Africa has various acts and strategy plans in place to protect our environment. For example, there is the Biodiversity Bill, the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, the National Biodiversity Framework and the National Environmental Management Plan to name but a few. Cape Town itself even has its own Biodiversity Strategy. While we have established the South African National

Biodiversity Institute, it seems that our constitution isn't very clear on who is responsible for micro-scale management of our biodiversity. This makes day-to-day decision making very difficult; in particular, just who is responsible for mowing the grass and thus, inevitably, the flowering wildflowers on our public open spaces?

Over the past few years I have documented a number of the wildflower species found on public open spaces in the northern suburbs of Cape Town. Even in this short period and with my limited experience it has become clear to me that nearly all of them seem to be declining, notably largely because they are being mowed down before they have had a chance to flower and set seed. These last vestiges of our floral heritage are being replaced by invasive alien species such as Port Jackson, rooikrans, pines, many species of weeds, and in particular, the worst culprit, Kikuyu grass! The indiscriminate dumping of garden refuse and building rubble has also contributed to the degradation of these areas. These observations and the fact that we are ignorantly destroying our children's inheritance, motivated me to write this article.

I would like to share the diversity I have observed and recorded from a few sites over the last two years. The

first I will simply call St John's Street, a public open space that borders the Durbanville Racecourse in Durbanville. The second is Uitkamp Wetland, a public open space in the middle of D'Urbanvale residential estate, also in Durbanville, and the third is the Jack Muller Park in Boston, Bellville.

St John's Street, Durbanville

St John's Street looks like a patch of uninteresting veld for most of the year. To the general public it might even look neglected and untidy, but just look at some of the species that can be found there during the spring flowering season. A mass display of *Dimorphotheca pluvialis* (rain daisy, reënblommetjie) is often the first to flower. Soon thereafter, the white veld is complemented with orange-red *Gladiolus alatus* (turkey-chick, kalkoentjie), blue, yellow and white varieties of *Babiana stricta* (Breede Valley babiana, stompstert bobbejaantjie), the beautiful *Babiana ambigua* (bobbejaantjie), the tiny, wonderfully striped stalk of *Lachenalia unifolia* (blou viooltjie) with its blue and pink flowers, a mass display of yellow to purple *Lachenalia pustulata* (knoppies viooltjie), four different species of *Romulea* (froetang), the yellow and black *Baeometra uniflora* (slangkop), the satin blue *Geissorhiza aspera* (blue satinflow-

er, satynblom), the colourful *Sparaxis villosa* (purple bonnet, blou kappie), the orchid *Corycium orobanchoides* (broomrape orchid, bastertrewwa), a variety of moraeas, and various other annuals from the Scrophulariaceae (foxgloves), Gentianaceae (gentians), Campanulaceae (bell flowers) and Asteraceae (daisies) families to mention but a few. Along with this wonderful display also comes a myriad of insects that feed on the nectar and pollen of these flowers fulfilling the important function of pollination. This is truly a fascinating place to visit during the flowering season as each week there seems to be another surprise, yet to many people, it is seen as an unkempt eyesore that needs to be cut and trimmed.

Uitkamp Wetland, Durbanville

Uitkamp doesn't quite have the mass displays as St John's Street, but it boasts so many species considered rare that it seems unbelievable that it isn't formally protected. It contains unique and critically endangered habitats – Karoooid dolomite outcrops surrounded by seasonal wetlands including *Chondropetalum rectum* (restios, besemriet) and *Athanasia capitata* (klaaslouwbos) flats – and yet it sits in the middle of a housing estate, with the majority of residents totally unaware of the absolute treasure in their midst. The seasonal wetlands are similar to those around Darling and there are quite a number of species that can be found here. The delightful *Geissorhiza radians* (wine cup, witring kelkiewyn), *Gladiolus trichonemifolius* (geelkalkoentjie, botterlelie) and the rare *Moraea tricholor* (spog uintjie) and *Moraea villosa* (peacock moraea, blouflappie, uiltjie) are such examples. Here too one can expect to find something different every week during the flowering season. Even visiting at different times of the day will be rewarding as some species flower in the morning, some only later in the day and yet others only in the late afternoon. It is an absolute paradise in spring with an abundance of life you simply could not ignore if you took the time to have a closer look.

Jack Muller Park, Bellville

The Jack Muller Park used to be a place to be enjoyed, but nowadays it is neglected and overgrown with weeds and alien invasive trees. But, there are still some wonderful treasures to be found. Here one still finds the late summer flowering *Brunsvigia orientalis*



ABOVE: *Moraea villosa* (blouflappie, peacock moraea).

LEFT: *Babiana stricta* (stompsert bobbejaantjie).

BELLOW: *Gladiolus alatus* (kalkoentjie).

Photos: Karen Marais.



BELOW: *Geissorhiza radians* (witring kelkiewyn).
Photo: Karen Marais.

BOTTOM LEFT: *Kukumakranka* (*Gethyllis* sp.).
Photo: N.M. Du Plessis.

BOTTOM RIGHT: *Sparaxis villosa* (bloukappie).
Photo: Karen Marais.





“It is hard to believe that there are no clear guidelines on the optimal management of our public open spaces.”



TOP: *Gladiolus alatus* (kalkoentjie).
Photo: Karen Marais.

RIGHT: *Lachenalia orthopetala* (viooltjie).
Photo: Karen Marais.

BOTTOM LEFT: *Pterygodium catholicum* (moederkappie). Photo: Karen Marais.

BOTTOM RIGHT: *Haemanthus pubescens* (blood flower, poeierkwas). Photo: N.M. Du Plessis.



(king's candelabra, koningskandelaar), *Haemanthus pubescens* (poeierkwas) and *Amaryllis belladonna* (March lily, belladonna) occurring naturally, the winter to spring flowering *Lachenalia bulbifera* (red lachenalia, rooinaeltjie) and *L. aloides* (Cape cowslip, vierkleurtjie) as well as the mid-December flowering *Gethyllis afra* (kukumakranka). Few people, however, still make use of the park as it is considered unsafe.

From the start of the first winter rains one can observe the sprouting of bulbs and annuals. Unfortunately, the Kikuyu grass also starts to recover from the summer drought at about the same time. I have seen how patches of Kikuyu grass in the St John's Street open space can spread up to 2 m per year if left uncontrolled, and how it completely out-competes the wildflowers, suffocating them. Amazingly the response of many residents is not to appreciate the wonderful wildflower displays, but rather to complain to their local municipality about the 'grass' that should be cut.

The invading Kikuyu grass is often seen as a sign of domestication and progress, especially if it is regularly mowed by municipal tractors. Unfortunately, this mowing continues indiscriminately, often at the delicate time when wildflowers are preparing for their spring show, and even when they are in full flower, well before they have been allowed time to set seed. I am but an amateur naturalist, but the destructive effect of this practice seems so obvious that it is hard to believe that there are no clear guidelines on the optimal management of our public open spaces. I have questioned this practice on various occasions and the answers I get are always the same: 'The grass cutting schedule is fixed and cannot be changed' or, 'We have to react to complaints if the public open spaces seem untidy.' Still other responses are 'Why not just dig them up and plant them somewhere else?' This is easier said than done, as the larger percentage of these wildflowers is extremely soil and habitat specific, i.e. they simply will not grow under any other conditions. I suppose it all boils down to education!

Educating municipalities about their responsibility towards biodiversity conservation and the sense of making simple mind set adjustments (such as aggressively tackling Kikuyu grass invasion rather than simply mowing it down, or restricting the cutting of grass in sensitive areas), appear to be a

daunting task. Also, educating the public, particularly those very people who complain about the so-called untidiness when the Kikuyu grass is spreading from their very own lawns, appears to be an even greater undertaking. The aim of this article is not to point a finger, but rather to try and raise public awareness and appreciation and to change the perceptions of what is beautiful from tidy, neat green areas of sterility, to natural areas abounding with rich floral diversity.

The key regional conservation initiative in the greater Cape Town, the Cape Action for People and the Environment (CAPE), a government programme funded largely by the UN's Global Environment Facility, has recommended the protection of all remaining habitat types of the Cape Town lowlands. This should surely include many of the public open spaces such as those in and around Bellville and Durbanville that contain renosterveld or transition zones between renosterveld and strandveld. But, just who is responsible for looking after such areas and ensuring that their biodiversity is conserved? It would be a wonderful development if more formal recognition and protection were afforded to these areas, but for the time being it seems that the onus is on us to take ownership of these areas in our suburbs and treasure their rich biodiversity.

So, this spring, instead of driving to Darling or Postberg, why not go out and have a look at what is flowering on your local public open space? Better still, get involved and take ownership of these areas by looking after them and making your neighbours and friends aware of these treasures within our midst. 🌿

Further reading

Raimondo, D. 2006. *The Conservation Leaflet*, Issue 4, April 2006. South African National Biodiversity Institute, Pretoria, pp 1-8.

Manning, J. 2003. *Photographic guide to the wildflowers of South Africa*. Briza, Pretoria.



The author

Karen Marais is a physiotherapist by profession and married with two boys, Richard and Jacobus, aged 6 and 4. About three years ago, she became involved as a volunteer with CREW (Custodians of Rare and Endangered Wildflowers), going on fieldtrips, often with one of her children on her back, the other walking at her side. Through this programme and under the ever enthusiastic guidance of Tilla Raimondo and Ismail Ebrahim, she became hooked on plants and fascinated by the intricacies of ecosystems. This year, with both children at school, she is studying towards a B.Sc. Honours degree in Ecological Informatics at the University of the Western Cape.



ABOVE: An unusual variety of *Gladiolus alatus* (kalkoentjie). Photo: Karen Marais.

LEFT: A mixture of *Sparaxis bulbifera* and *S. grandiflora* (botterblom). Photo: Karen Marais.

BELOW: The amazing fruit of the kukumakranka (*Gethyllis* sp.). Photo: N.M. Du Plessis.



BOTTOM LEFT: *Geissorhiza aspera* (satynblom, blousysie). Photo: Karen Marais.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Richard and Jacobus Marais playing in the spring flowers in St John Street open space. Photo: Karen Marais.

