

# The Archibald Archive – Genus Guides

## KNIPHOFIA

Our cool, wet summers in West Wales suit many of the Drakensberg genera well, though some are less tolerant of our wetter winters. We are particularly fond of this splendid genus of herbaceous perennials in the Liliaceae (or Asphodelaceae, if you wish to split the family). The genus of about 70 species, spread from the Cape of South Africa northward through East Africa and Ethiopia into the Yemen, is particularly relevant to gardeners in cool temperate climates as they are mainly plants of the mountains and moister habitats. South Africa is the heartland of the genus with over 40 species. These are much more prevalent in the summer rainfall areas than in the Mediterranean climate of the south-western Cape, where they tend to be confined to seeps and permanently moist habitats. In Britain, though the genus is well-known and there are quite a lot of specific names about, many of these are misapplied or applied to plants of possible hybrid origin. Writing in 1914, the South African botanist N.E. Brown commented "that in a very great majority of cases plants of this genus raised from seed produced in any garden where more than one kind is grown, whether that garden be in South Africa or Europe, will not be true to name." For this reason we list a range of species very erratically and only when we have been able to arrange for the collection of a reasonable range of authentically named material of wild origin. A few species seem to come fairly evenly and reliably from cultivated seeds and we can make these available quite regularly. These are mostly summer-growing plants, starting to become active very late in spring, and seeds are best sown from late winter to spring. The seedlings should be kept growing throughout summer. Their natural habitats are often dry in winter so a compromise must be made when growing such plants in winter-wet climates. A well-drained site in full sun is certainly the best in winter and will suit most species if the rainfall of the average British summer materialises. In a dry summer they will appreciate plenty additional watering and mulching. Winter losses in Britain are seldom due to low temperatures. Excess moisture when the plants are dormant is the most likely cause.

Nomenclature and Further information: The nomenclature we use usually attempts to follow the 1968 monograph by L.E. Codd. We have not always found it as easy to identify material of wild origin as it should be, using his account. Good information for gardeners does not exist. There is an excellent account by Jane Taylor in 'The Plantsman' Vol.7, Part 3 (December, 1985) but the best, modern easily accessible reference is Phillips & Rix 'Perennials' Vol. 2, pages 160-163, where several species are illustrated, along with reliable, accurate information.