

# The Archibald Archive – Genus Guides

## ROMULEA

We are trying to list an expanding range of seeds from these fascinating plants, as we cannot think of another really important genus of dwarf, winter-growing monocotyledonous species, still so neglected by northern hemisphere bulb-enthusiasts. In the Iridaceae & almost certainly derived from the same ancient ancestor as *Crocus*, this genus, like *Erica*, *Gladiolus*, *Pelargonium* and several others, has its centre of diversity in South Africa with a secondary, much more limited centre in the Mediterranean area of the northern hemisphere. Though there a great variation in characters, the general pattern is of corms with crocus-like flowers, carried severally on stems of about 10-20cm., though some will extend to 30cm. or so as they approach fruiting. Many of the montane ones will open their flowers at about 5cm.

The assumption by most bulb enthusiasts that the South African species are really best grown under frost-free conditions may be true for some of the low altitude species of the SW Cape. Until recently, these have been the only ones we have had access to. There are, however, a great many mountain-plants, distributed through the ranges spreading from Namaqualand in a great curve to the South and West, along the borders of the Northern Cape and of the Great Karoo. There are many narrow endemics and an extraordinary explosion of species locally, particularly in the Nieuwoudtville area. Recently, several collectors, such as Rod and Rachel Saunders, have been visiting these mountains when the plants are in flower and returning to collect seed. They have little doubt that many of their collections, made at high altitudes, will be perfectly temperature-hardy in most of Europe & N America. We are satisfied ourselves that species such as *R. amoena*, *R. atrandra*, *R. monadelpha*, *R. monticola*, *R. syringodeoflora*, *R. tetragona* and the races of *R. tortuosa* will do well in much the same conditions as the northern hemisphere Mediterranean 'bulbs'.

Many more are likely to prove just as hardy as these but remember we are dealing with winter-growers from a dry, continental climate. They will need a summer rest. Treat them precisely as you would the majority of such northern hemisphere genera, as *Crocus*, *Fritillaria* or *Tulipa*, with which they will fit in perfectly in the bulb-frame or alpine-house. The very few alpine, summer rainfall taxa from the Drakensberg (*R. macowanii*, etc.) are totally hardy & satisfactory outside in the UK but, if you want to be perverse, these would probably forgive you for treating them like the vast, winter-growing majority.

Names follow the 1972 monograph by Dr. Miriam Phoebe de Vos 'The genus *Romulea* in South Africa' *Journal of South African Botany*, Suppl. Vol. 9.