INDIGENOUS

PLANT OF THE MONTH

By Geoff Nichols

***Kniphofia rooperi;* Winter Poker, Globe Poker, Rooper's Kniphofia; Lentevuurpyl (Afrikaans); icacane, umathunga ompofu (Zulu)**

This robust species is endemic to moist grasslands and wetlands from southern KwaZulu-Natal, through the wild coast of the Transkei to about East London. For me, this is an iconic species of intact wetlands on the KZN coast, and in cultivation, it makes a great accent plant for wetlands and edges of ponds, or even a rock garden. It is an ideal bedding plant for perennial herbaceous borders.

It is an evergreen poker with broad, green and often strongly recurved leaves, with a stout 600cm -1.5m high, red-yellow, almost spherical flower head, produced from about July to August. These rounded heads flower in midwinter which make this a very attractive species for cultivation.

It will live in shallow water on the edges of ponds or along seepage lines in a garden, but it's an adaptable species that can be used in a grassland garden or a herbaceous border. It enjoys extra water but is drought-resistant once it is established. An important characteristic of this species is that it is one of the few coastal pokers that, once it is established, can withstand moderate to severe frost, It is even grown in temperate gardens of Europe and the United Kingdom.

I have a theory that because poker rhizomes are highly palatable in the wild as well as in a garden, they are sought out by mole-rats and porcupine. In my sand soil at home, I cannot grow a poker in open ground - they only survive the attentions of these two rodents when grown in containers. A roof garden is a good site to grow Kniphofias but you have to provide the plants with regular water.

The second part of the theory is that the reason so many bulbs are found virtually exclusively in wetlands, is because that is the only place that mole-rats and porcupine find it difficult to survive underground because of the water-sodden soil. Other bulbs like Crinums and Scadoxus have their own protection strategy and are often found growing on rock plates or ledges where these same bulb predators canít climb to reach the plants.

I have been growing my bulbs on tables for years. Either concrete or thick 10mm thick fibre cement sheets. I place the bulbs like Crinum, Cyrtanthus, Clivia, Haemanthus, Nerine, Kniphofia and Tulbaghia on the surface and add a layer of soil and leaf litter about 30-50mm thick over the roots. The bulbs thrive because their roots can spread out. The roots don't rot because the water drains off the table allowing the roots to breathe. I add other plants like Streptocarpus, Begonia, Crassula and Peperomia between the roots of the bulbs and I get a lovely display.