

Calitzdorp Plant Chat

51. Blou Tulp – *Moraea polystachya* – beautiful but poisonous

The recent soaking rain that Calitzdorp has received over the last few weeks has resulted in explosion of veld flowers, including masses of the blue **Wild Iris** or **Blou Tulp** that now dots the veld around the town and may appear in their thousands. Even in our own back yard, 20 or more plants have popped up where nothing at all appeared last year – clearly the good rains have stimulated their appearance this year. Which is great for plant lovers such as ourselves. But perhaps bad news for farmers because Blou Tulp is highly poisonous to livestock. As early as 1923, this tulip was given the name of *Moraea toxicaria* in Namibia – an indication of the reputation that the plant had attracted by early farmers in what was then German West Africa. As with most tulip species, poisoning normally takes place in animals brought in from tulip-free areas where the animals are not familiar with the plant. It is said that animals that grow up in a tulip-infested area generally avoid the plants unless grazing becomes scarce. But if hay containing tulip plant parts is brought in and fed to animals, inadvertent poisoning frequently takes place.

Moraea polystachya is a wild iris and, predictably, is a member of the Iris family, **Iridaceae**. The common name Tulp refers to a Tulip which is a misnomer since tulips are not related to tulips at all. The species name *polystachya*, from *poly* (Latin: ‘many’) and *stachya* (Latin: ‘a spike of flowers’), refers to the two to four flowers that are borne together in a group.

Blou Tulp is not a rare species – it occurs throughout the drier parts of southern South Africa and up into Namibia. Of the roughly 195 species of Wild Iris or *Moraea* occurring in southern Africa, at least 30 species are found in the Klein Karoo many of them very rare and confined to limited areas. Only the few poisonous species are collectively referred to as tulp. Sadly, this beautiful species flowering around Calitzdorp does have a more sinister side to it.

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Moraea polystachya or Blou Tulp, is flowering around Calitzdorp after the recent good rains.

