

## Introducing South African Bulbs

by Yolanda Wilson

Gardeners who have a Naked Lady, Lucifer, Green Goddess or Red Hot Poker know how easy it is to be seduced by South African bulbs. They are hardy to 10 degrees so they don't freeze, they love full hot sun which we have in the summer; and they multiply so you can fill areas in your garden quickly. Hummingbirds and butterflies are attracted to their bright colors and they stay in bloom for long periods of time.

The history of the South African bulb trade is closely linked to the history of the world. World powers – Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, early European explorers – made money by trading flower bulbs. Today in the Northwest you can buy them at garden shows, farmers markets or grocery stores. You can order them from the convenience of your home on-line or by phone, which is much easier than taking a boat around the world.

The early history of the South African bulb trade is vague. We don't know whether the Egyptians, Greeks or Romans acquired South African bulbs first, nor do we know whether they did so by land or by sea – but they had them. Sea-going voyages from Europe to the Far East included a stop at the Cape of Good Hope, not only to stock up on food, but to collect bulbs from the area.

Early bulb traders became wealthy selling bulbs to royalty, wealthy merchants, schools and churches. The DNA of some bulbs in royal, botanical and church gardens can be traced to original stock in South Africa.

The Portuguese were the first explorers to travel to South Africa, followed by the Spanish. They found a country filled with unusual and exotic flower bulbs that were easy to transport home and grew easily in their climate. When the Dutch and English discovered South African bulbs, they assumed that they needed to be grown indoors in a conservatory or greenhouse in northern climates.

The story goes that an English farmer had a small glass greenhouse with many exotic plants including *Kniphofia* (Red Hot Pokers) inside. He took all the containers outside to clean the greenhouse and accidentally left one plant outside for the winter. It survived. Now we know that South African bulbs can survive English, Dutch and Northwest winters. It took only 150 years to figure it out. The moral of the story: In gardening don't believe anything anyone tells you or anything you read in a book. Plants break rules.

There are hundreds of South African bulbs that grow wonderfully in Northwest gardens. They can be divided or planted year-round, but I prefer to do it anytime they are not in bloom. They do not grow well in cold shade or in excessively damp soil, because they need to dry out. South African bulbs in containers should be placed where they will remain dry for the winter. They will rot before they freeze. They are winter hardy to 10 degrees Fahrenheit, and need at least three hours of sun a day and good drainage to be happy. Future issues will feature articles about specific bulbs that I enjoy growing.

*Yolanda Wilson is a 2004 graduate of the WSU Master Gardener Program and is also proprietor of [Vanveenbulbs.com](http://Vanveenbulbs.com), a flower bulb company selling on the internet and at garden shows and farmers markets.*

*She's always happy to speak to gardening groups about flower bulbs. You can find her each Saturday at the Beaverton Farmers Market (where she's been selling bulbs for 14 years) or e-mail her at [info@vanveenbulbs.com](mailto:info@vanveenbulbs.com).*