

Fall Bulb and Mesemb Seed Alert

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Here at Castillo San Miguel the last few nights have cooled off. This means fall will arrive this year. And, it means TIME FOR PLANTING WINTER-GROWING SEED!

Our outdoor fall, winter and spring temperatures are ideal for almost all winter-growing mesembs and South African bulbs. The only thing required is Plant; Water; and Protect from birds. The mesembs are very fast from seed; while Lithops and Conophytum may take two to three years to flower, there are plenty of other mesembs that will flower this spring from fall sowing.

South African winter-rainfall bulbs are amazing gems, with brilliantly-colored flowers, often fragrant on plants anywhere from tiny to large. If you haven't seen them, look some up online. They are very easy to grow. Most Lachenalia will bloom in their second or third growing season. Plus, during summer dormancy, you can just put the pots in a box in a closet and forget about them until September. I regard bulbs as succulents; their underground storage organs tide them over a dry season usually much longer than the rainy season.

Gladiolus species are among the choicest, featuring generally smaller, more brilliantly colored flowers with wildly more variable shapes than found in the florist's hybrids, often wonderfully fragrant. Hybrid Glads are as different from the species as Conan the Barbarian is from a suitable date for your daughter.

Now is the time to plant because the seeds seem to sprout best with alternating warm days and cool nights to set up germination. Germination is usually far better outside in the fall than indoors under lights.

Check out some of my favorite bulb genera online. Note that many genera include species from both the winter and summer rainfall areas of southern Africa, and now is the time for winter-growers.

A good place to start is the Pacific Bulb Society wiki: www.pacificbulbsociety.org.

Seed sources include Steve Brack at Mesa Garden in New Mexico (www.mesagarden.com), who sells quite a few, and Rachel and Rod Saunders at Silverhill Seeds in South Africa (www.silverhillseeds.co.za), who list an enormous number of genera and species. I have been ordering from both for many years.

To order from Mesa Garden, go to the Web site, and make an ascending list of catalog numbers. E-mail the list together with your shipping address and credit card information. Or, you can e-mail the list and phone in your credit card—call in the evening. The Silverhill Web site has a shopping cart feature; you enter your credit card and shipping address at checkout. Rachel sends multiple individual orders pre-boxed and

addressed inside one large box with proper permits to a relative in the US, who then resends the individual boxes. Postage is not expensive and the permit costs are included. I usually get my Silverhill orders within two to three weeks.

I especially recommend genera *Albuca*, *Babiana*, *Bulbinella*, *Daubinya*, *Ferraria*, *Freesia*, *Geissorhiza*, *Gladiolus*, *Ixia*, *Lachenalia*, *Lapeirousia*, *Moraea*, *Ornithogalum*, *Polyxena*, *Romulea*, *Tritonia*, *Tritoniopsis*, and *Veltheimia*. And, our local *Dichelostemma pulchellum* should be planted now, too. This is a tiny bulb with flowers just as gorgeous as any in Africa. I think the DBG plant shop sells seed.

Prepare a place outside with morning sun or all-day dappled sun. Arrange to screen it from birds. Don't bother trying if you don't have some method to screen out the birds! A single layer of bird netting draped on a frame over the pots works fine.

These bulbs do best in deep pots; most have contractile roots to pull themselves down to their favorite depth. I use 20-ounce foam cups, which are far cheaper to buy than any standard pot. I don't poke holes in the bottom until the seeds are well up; they need to be very wet to sprout. You can use straight builder's sand for soil; few of these bulbs live long in potting soil mixtures. Add a pinch of bone meal near the bottom of the pot.

Write the name on the foam cup with a ball-point pen. Fill the pot $\frac{3}{4}$ full with sand or 50:50 sand:loam mixture. Sprinkle the seeds on top. Then top with sand, leaving a half inch for watering. Gently, so as not to disturb ('not do disturb') the seeds, some of which will float, fill the entire cup with water and set in place. Move on to the next cup. Add water to the brim to all the cups when you are done with a planting session.

Let the water evaporate down until the top sand is just dry. Then fill again with water. Seeds take 10 days to eight weeks to sprout. Once a goodly number in a cup are up, poke a hole or two in the bottom of the cup. The growing plants need good drainage and appreciate being moist but not soggy. You will learn how to water your plants.

As spring unfolds, stop watering your plants when their foliage begins to yellow. Different genera and species will go dormant at different times; I remove pots from the growing area to my carport for foliage 'ripening.' Allow the plants to go fully dry and dormant. Store over the summer in boxes or anyplace where they will not be watered.

Don't transplant your seedlings to new containers until after the third growing season. They are touchy before this, and so small they are easy to damage. During the summer after the third growing season, unpot your pots one by one into a basin. Look carefully for all the little bulbs—some are white and slivery, others brown and nut-like. Save the soil and put it back into the same foam cups; you will almost certainly overlook some. Try and notice how deeply they have pulled themselves, and pot them at the same depth in the new container. Use something deep! A very sandy soil mix with no potting soil works best for almost all of them. Keep your newly-potted seedlings dry until nights are cooling in late September, then put outside and water heavily once. If they come up, resume regular watering. If they don't come up, wait two weeks or so, and try again.

Dive adult bulbs every three to four years, or when they get crowded. A great time to divide is in September, so you can bring extras to our October silent auction!

That's about all there is to it!