Treasures from South Africa

Clusters of delicate flowers, often in muted colours, will bloom for several months, making tulbaghia an irresistible garden plant, writes **John Hoyland**

IT has become the mantra of many progressive nurserymen and garden designers that only by looking at plants in the wild can we understand how to use them in our gardens and to grow them well. Given the diverse origins of plants we grow in Britain, research at this level would need a lifetime of travel, but a good place to start might be South Africa, home to an astonishing 10% of the world's plants. Among the area's endemic treasures are tulbaghia, bulbs producing clusters of delicate flowers on wiry stems that resemble miniature agapanthus.

The genus has none of the diversity or exuberance of agapanthus, a near relative, but its dainty flowers, often in muted colours, coupled with an ability to flower for several months, make it an irresistible garden plant. On a visit to its native country, I saw the flowers everywhere: in supermarket car parks, private gardens, public parks, and municipal planting schemes. Yet it wasn't until I came across a meadow filled with hundreds of the plants that I began to see their true beauty. A pale-mauve haze hung over the ground and the air was gently perfumed with the scent of sweet onion. This was not something that could be replicated in a British garden, but the sight did make me want to grow more tulbaghia.

The genus is named after Ryk Tulbagh, an 18th-century governor of what was then →

Tulbaghia violacea **adds airy elegance to natural-looking, grass-filled borders**









the Dutch Cape Colony. He seems to have been an austere character, who legislated against all kinds of extravagance and frippery, including banning women from lining dresses with velvet or silk. He was, however, an intellectual and fascinated by the natural world. Aware that the flora of southern Africa was far more diverse than Europe, he corresponded with several botanists and sent hundreds of specimens to Carl Linnaeus. It was Linnaeus who named *Tulbaghia*, presumably unaware that he was honouring such a severe character with such a delicate flower.

The foliage of tulbaghia has, when crushed, an onion-and-garlic scent that some people find too pungent. Almost every book and nursery catalogue suggests that the plant is widely known as 'society garlic'. As are many so-called common names, this is often seen written down, but rarely spoken: I have never heard it. It may be that, in the past, the name was popular, but it is certainly no longer current.

The soubriquet derives from the suggestion that, when used in cooking, the leaves and stems of the plant leave none of the aftertaste (nor, importantly, the after-smell) of garlic. Neither as flavoursome nor as abundant as the British native wild garlic (*Allium ursinum*), the leaves do, nonetheless, have a spicy, garlicky flavour. The flowers are also edible and have a peppery taste. Recently, they have begun to appear sprinkled over salads in fancy restaurants. I have tried this at home, but prefer my flowers in the garden. Rather than using them to decorate salads, add the flowers to bouquets: they will last a week in a vase.

> 'At night, the flowers release a honey-scented perfume'

The plant I saw growing en masse in South Africa was *Tulbaghia violacea*, the species that is most often seen in British nurseries. It reaches about 20in tall and, as with all tulbaghia, the stems grow clear of the foliage so the loose clusters of mauve flowers can be seen clearly. A variegated form, *T. violacea* 'Silver Lace', has paler-green leaves with white margins that create a silvery-grey sheen over the plant. *T. violacea* 'John May's Special' is a selection chosen for its size, with stems 30in tall and flowers that are much larger than those of the species. Of the several white-flowered cultivars, the most attractive is, perhaps, *T. violacea* 'Pallida', the white flowers of which have a hint of pink on the petals.

A similar species with smaller, paler flowers and a densely packed flowerhead is *Tulbaghia simmleri*. In the wild, it is pollinated by moths, so, at night, the flowers release a honey-scented perfume. The fragrance is light and subtle, but a pot grown on a terrace will sweeten the air on warm summer evenings.

It is worth searching specialist nurseries for the more unusual species. *Tulbaghia montana* has pale-pink flowers with a bright orange corona, reminiscent of a bicoloured daffodil. On *T. natalensis*, the flowers are similar, much paler and smaller than its cousin, with diaphanous petals. Both are about 1ft tall and both have evening-scented flowers.

The genus has not attracted the attention of plant breeders in the same way as agapanthus, but an increasing number of hybrids are appearing. One that is widely available in Britain is *Tulbaghia* 'Purple Eye', which has pale-pink petals with a dark, almost purple centre. In South Yorkshire, Steve Hickman, the National Collection holder, is the most ardent ambassador of the genus and has a breeding programme that is producing distinct and attractive hybrids. He has already introduced several new cultivars and hybrids and has many more in the pipeline.

My tulbaghia are mostly grown in pots, grouped closely together on a sunny terrace. The mauve, white and variegated forms →

Facing page, top row, left to right: ***Tulbaghia* 'Purple Eye'; *T. natalensis*; *T. simmleri*;** *Middle row:* ***T. violacea* 'Silver Lace'; *T. violacea* 'John May's Special'; *T. violacea* 'Pallida'.** *Bottom row:* ***T.* 'Green Beauty'; *T. simmleri* 'Cheryl Renshaw'; *T.* 'Fairy Star'.** *Above:* **Singly or grouped together, as here with succulents and *Beschorneria yuccoides*, *T. violacea* is happy in a pot, but needs plenty of sun to thrive**

mingle companionably with pots of shrubby salvias. In the garden, I have planted 'John May's Special' among the airy grass *Sporobolus heterolepis*: the tulbaghia appear to be held aloft on a foam of the grass's flowerheads. I have seen a similar effect where tulbaghia grow among tufts of *Festuca glauca*. They are at ease in loose, natural-looking planting schemes, but can also be used in more formal situations. I have edged a path with lines of *Tulbaghia violacea* that grow behind the short, stiff stems of *Allium* 'Summer Beauty'. The effect is not as imposing as a wild South African meadow, but, nonetheless, it is a splendid sight.

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How to grow *Tulbaghia*

In most of Britain, tulbaghia have to be grown in pots, with the containers moved during the winter into a frost-free greenhouse or a cold frame. Use a mixture of about one-third each of loam, compost and horticultural grit. An occasional feed with a high potash fertiliser (the type used for feeding tomatoes) will help to prolong flowering

In coastal and other mild areas of the country, where the winter temperature does not drop below about 23°F (-5°C), tulbaghia can be grown in the garden. If necessary, add grit to ensure that the soil is free-draining and do not crowd them with other plants. Fearless gardeners in colder areas can try growing tulbaghia in the garden, but should cut the plant down to a few inches above soil level in late October and cover the whole plant with a 3in-deep mulch

Whether grown in pots or in the ground, tulbaghia need plenty of sunshine to thrive. Plants will grow in part shade, but will produce far fewer flowers

Tulbaghia will tolerate periods of drought, but to flower well they need moisture during the flowering season, which, for most forms, is from May to September. Those in pots will need watering daily during hot weather

To encourage more blooms, remove flowers as they begin to form seed pods. Cut the stems off as close to the base as possible, being careful not to remove any leaves

In frost-free areas, *Tulbaghia capensis* can be grown at the front of borders, but will need protection over winter