

A WINDOW ONTO THE SPECTACULAR FLORA OF SOUTH AFRICA

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Review Title:

A window onto the spectacular flora of South Africa

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The spectacular diversity of South Africa's flora makes a single-volume field guide to the country's wild flowers a mouthwatering prospect – for the amateur plant enthusiast and the professional botanist alike. At the same time, the sheer scale of the flora makes the production of such a field guide seem a mammoth task. Thus, in producing his *Field guide to the wild flowers of South Africa*, John Manning has taken a bold and exciting step.

Drawing on a profound knowledge of the South African flora, as well as considerable experience in the field guide industry, the fruit of Manning's efforts is a compact and beautifully presented volume. Each of the 1 100 included species is represented by a high quality photograph, a concise description (covering morphology and habitat), a distribution map, and a handy calendar bar indicating flowering time. In addition, Manning has prepared a useful introductory section outlining the main features of South Africa's biomes, as well as the morphological characteristics of the plant families that are represented in the volume. Owing to its broad scope and fine layout, the book will undoubtedly be highly popular and prove useful to a diversity of lay-users. Unfortunately, taxonomic biases will compromise its utility for the professional botanist or serious amateur.

Recognising the impossibility of covering the South African flora in a comprehensive manner, Manning has elected to focus on plant species with 'showy blooms', excluding tree species and graminoids (grasses, restios, rushes and sedges), as well as any other species whose flowers or inflorescences have a diameter < 10 mm. While no omission is desirable, some compromise is unavoidable and, in this context, the decision to exclude trees and graminoids, at least, seems reasonable. Besides the justifications provided by the author in his introduction, it is worth noting that, except in the case of sedges and rushes, these groups are adequately treated by existing field guides, including Dorrat-Haaksma and Linder's *Restios of the fynbos*, Van Oudtshoorn's *Guide to grasses of southern Africa*, and Van Wyk and Van Wyk's *Field guide to the trees of southern Africa*.

What is disappointing, however, is Manning's decision to exclude taxa that are non-arborescent and non-graminoid, but which nonetheless have small flowers or inflorescences. Since such taxa are numerous in the South African flora and include some genera that are locally or regionally abundant, their omission from this guide will be a significant source of frustration for users who desire a fuller picture, if only at genus level, of the flora they are exploring. Writing as a professional botanist, I would have preferred to see broader generic sampling (with small-flowered taxa represented), if necessary with fewer species represented per genus (but retaining enough species to reflect infrageneric variability). At the very least, it would have been worth including some reference to important genera that were not sampled, perhaps with some indication of their differences from the represented genera. Although an illustrated guide to the genera of South Africa's wild flowers, as mooted here, might be useful to the more serious botanist, the rarified sampling of species that it entails could well hold less appeal for the 'occasional' wild flower enthusiast, even though this is, perhaps, Manning's intended audience. Nevertheless, as Manning stipulates, species selection is geared towards representing the 'more common and conspicuous' members of the included genera. Therefore I expect that this guide will provide an excellent service to such an audience.

A feature that distinguishes this guide from other South African wild flower guides is the inclusion of heuristically useful, character-based identification tools. These include a user-friendly, dichotomous key to the main groups of plant families and a searchable table of family level characteristics, termed the 'family finder'. In establishing the linkages between morphological characteristics and specific plant groups, these tools empower the lay-user to identify plants in a predictive manner, making plant identification an exercise in biological detective work. Given their fundamental utility, such tools tend to be under-utilised in field guides to the South African flora, presumably out of a concern that they will frighten-off the average lay-user. Yet, such tools seem unavoidable when dealing with a flora as large and complex as that of South Africa.

How well the identification tools presented in Manning's guide will work in practice, though, remains to be seen. I have a few concerns, particularly in relation to the dichotomous key. For example, I suspect that the description of the 'unusual plants' category is too ambiguous, while the omission of petal fusion as a character in the eudicot key seems surprising. I also found some of the terminology confusing, notably the application of 'symmetrical' and 'two-lipped' to refer, respectively, to radial and bilateral symmetry.

In short, John Manning's new field guide represents a bold attempt to capture the full breadth of the South African wild flower diversity. In this it differs from most existing guides to South African wild flowers, which typically have a regional focus. The wide range of South African flora, however, has necessitated compromises, some of which will limit the utility of Manning's guide for the more serious user. While the omission of grasses, restios and trees is adequately compensated by the existence of other guides focussing on these assemblages, the exclusion of other small-flowered taxa may be potentially problematic. On another level, the distinct advantage of this guide is the introduction of character-based identification tools which empower the lay-user with predictive identification skills.

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Source: Photo taken by Tony Verboom.

Pentzia globosa, photographed near Noupoort in the Northern Cape, is an example of a widespread and common genus which has been omitted from John Manning's *Field guide to wild flowers of South Africa* on account of its small inflorescences