Aloe mitriformis subsp. distans: the small mitre aloe

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The genus *Aloe* is large and diverse with over 550 species, subspecies and varieties, together with numerous garden hybrids (Carter *et al*. 2011). These range in size from the diminutive *Aloe descoingsii* with rosettes only 5-6 cm across to large branched trees such as *Aloe speciosa* at 6m tall. Incidentally, the really big tree aloes now have their own genus, *Aloidendron*.

*Aloes* occur naturally throughout Africa, Madagascar and Arabia, whilst a few species are naturalised in areas such as the Mediterranean coast. There are about 120 species of *Aloe* in South Africa (Van Wyk & Smith, 2003) and here I focus on *Aloe mitriformis* subsp. *distans*.

*Aloe mitriformis* was first described in 1768 and now consists of three subspecies, of which subsp. *distans* is probably the most commonly encountered in cultivation. The first illustration as *Aloe mitraeformis* (β) *brevifolia* (Fig. 1, page 4) was
published in 1811 by John Sims in *Curtis’s Botanical Magazine* (Sims, 1811). The following year it was described as a distinct species, *Aloe distans*, by the famous British botanist Adrian Hardy Haworth. Nearly two hundred years later, in 2002, it was reduced to a subspecies of *Aloe mitriformis*. Subspecies *distans* is distinguished from subsp. *mitriformis* and subsp. *comptonii* by being smaller and by its prominent marginal teeth.

*Aloe mitriformis* subsp. *distans* has a creeping habit and branches freely from the base forming dense clumps of sprawling stems up to 3 m long, shown here growing in a 20 cm diameter pot (Fig. 2, page 5). The leaves are roughly triangular in shape, bluish-green in colour and the leaf margins are armed with strong golden-yellowish teeth. The inflorescence has the flowers arranged in a dense head (termed capitate) whilst the individual flowers are relatively large at about 4 cm long and for my plant, deep dusky pink in colour (Fig. 3, page 6). However, according to Van Wyk & Smith (2003), flower colour can vary from dull orange-red to bright red.
The name *mitriformis* comes from the appearance of the rosette apex, being shaped liked a Bishop’s cap or mitre, whilst the name *distans* comes from the long (distant) internodes (the structures where the leaf bases join the stem) (Grace et al. 2011).

The plant is easy to grow with no particular requirements, being a moderately slow grower that in time can develop into a large specimen. The plant shown here (Fig. 2, page 5) is just over 10 years old from seed at which point it flowered for the first time.

*Aloe mitriformis* occurs in the Western Cape, South Africa, where subsp. *distans* is restricted to a narrow coastal belt from Danger Point 150 km north of Cape Town, then northwards to St. Helena Bay (Van Wyk & Smith, 2003).

### References


Colin C. Walker
c.walker702@btinternet.com

**Fig. 1.** *Aloe mitraeformis* (β) *brevifolia* (from Sims, 1811).

**Fig. 2.** *Aloe mitriformis* subsp. *distans* growing in a 20 cm diameter pot.

**Fig. 3.** Inflorescence of *Aloe mitriformis* subsp. *distans*.