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Stapelia divaricata Masson – the rarest and most localised species of *Stapelia*

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Stapelia divaricata is a rare species that has been illustrated infrequently. Its history is discussed and plants in flower in cultivation are described and illustrated. Its rarity in habitat and very localised distribution in South Africa are emphasised. Photographs as indicated.

History

Francis Masson (1741–1805) was the first official plant collector sent out from the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, to collect living plant material at the Cape of Good Hope for King George III. Masson was under the direction of Sir Joseph Banks, Kew's unofficial Director (Saltmarsh, 2003). Masson was at the Cape for three journeys between 1772 and 1795 and was in South Africa for 12 years in total. He collected much

material for Kew, especially heaths (*Erica*) and pelargoniums. His contribution to botany and horticulture was enormous, such that, for example, he collected about half of the known species of *Pelargonium*. Amongst his many other significant discoveries *Strelitzia reginae*, the Bird of Paradise, can be singled out and he also described *Aloe dichotoma* (now *Aloidendron dichotomum*) as a new species. He is commemorated in *Massonia*, a genus of South African bulbs.



Fig. 1 The first illustration of *S. divaricata* by Masson (1797)



Fig. 2 The second published illustration of the species from Sims (1807)

Masson is renowned especially for his work on stapeliads on which he published his now famed monograph *Stapeliae Novae* (Masson, 1796–7). This was originally issued in four parts between 1796 and 1797 illustrated with 41 hand-coloured plates of which 40 were based on paintings by him in South Africa; only one plate is a copy and not an original Masson painting. In addition to being an explorer and botanist he was, therefore, also a highly talented botanical artist. Prior to Masson, only six species of stapeliads were known and he increased the number of species to 41, all recognised today although now in several genera segregated from *Stapelia*: *Duvalia*, *Hoodia*, *Huernia*, *Orbea*, *Pectinaria*, *Piarranthus*, *Quaqua*, *Tridentea* and *Tromotriche*.

Stapelia divaricata Masson is one of his new species collected sometime before 1792, illustrated and described by him in 1797 in *Stapeliae Novae* (Masson, 1796–7). He named this new species ‘*divaricata*’ meaning ‘straggling’ for the sprawling, divaricate nature of the stems (Fig. 1). Since then this species has been universally recognised, although it has accumulated a few synonyms. It was made the type of a new genus described by Adrian Haworth in 1812 when it became *Gonostemon divaricata* (Masson) Haw., but this genus has never been widely accepted. Another synonym is *Stapelia pallida* Wendland (Leach, 1985). The second hand-coloured illustration of this species (Fig. 2) was published by John Sims in *Curtis’s Botanical Magazine* (Sims, 1807), the world’s longest-running botanical journal. This illustration was based on a specimen cultivated by J Walker (no relation!) of Stockwell Common, London. Sims wrote that “The branches of this very distinct species of *Stapelia*, going off almost at right angles, and being long and tapering, at once mark it from every other, even when out of bloom...Flowers the latter-end of the summer, and requires the same treatment as other succulent plants from the Cape”.

The next recorded collection was by Kate C Stanford in May 1935 near Heidelberg, since when very few additional collections have been made (Bruyns, 2005).

The species in habitat

Stapelia divaricata is the rarest and most localised of all stapelias (Bruyns, 2005). It occurs in only a few localities east of Swellendam in the Western Cape province where it forms dense and quite large clumps up to 30cm diameter. Specimens are usually tightly wedged between stones and small bushes (Bruyns, 2005). It is therefore much to Masson’s credit that he discovered this rare and highly localised species.



Fig. 3 *Stapelia divaricata* flowering in cultivation. Flower is about 3.5cm diameter (Photo: Colin Walker)

The species in cultivation

Stapelia divaricata exhibits considerable variation in corolla size and colour, but the species is easily recognised by its rather odd stems and the unusual waxy appearance of the flowers (Leach, 1985).

My plant shown in Fig. 3 has stems typical of the genus being four-angled with small tubercles and leaf-rudiments. Its stems are bright green, tinged with purple but only up to 8mm across and hence fairly slender for the genus; these are very finely pubescent like fine sandpaper. They have the erect to straggling arrangement for which the species was named.

Stapelias have an incredible range of flower size with *Stapelia erectiflora* having the smallest (around 1cm in diameter) and *S. gigantea* being the largest (at up to 40cm across). *Stapelia divaricata* is therefore at the lower end of this range, since its flowers are small, only up to 5cm diameter, with the one illustrated here being only 3.5cm diameter (Fig. 3). Flowers are shiny with an unusual waxy appearance and very variable, ranging from flesh coloured as here to purplish (as in Masson's original collection shown in Fig. 1). The centre of the corolla of my plant is very pale pinky white, whilst the lobes are a much deeper dusky pink with the tips similar to the central corolla. The surface of the corolla is not smooth but is marked by fine, rough, irregular lines (rugulose). The flower appears to be hairless (glabrous) to the eye but does in fact have a few small fine hairs principally on the edge. The margins of the corolla lobes are reflexed. A second clone but with habitat data is shown in Fig. 4.

Fig. 4 *Stapelia divaricata*, a plant grown by Roy Mottram from Darrel Plowes's collection (DP4042) that flowered in 2005. This originated from Bruce Bayer (Karoo Garden 325/71) collected at Buffeljachts, Swellendam. This clone has been widely distributed (Photo: Roy Mottram)



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