Stapelia leendertziae – a uniquely large, tubular-flowered species

Colin C Walker

*Stapelia leendertziae* is described flowering in the author’s collection. Photography by the author unless otherwise indicated.

**Introduction**

*Stapelia leendertziae* is one of the most distinctive and striking species described by N E Brown at Kew (1910), being the only *Stapelia* with a large flower tube. It is a very well-known and widely grown species. I first wrote about this species in 1979 (Walker, 1979) but it was only in 2021 that I first flowered a plant.

**History**

*Stapelia leendertziae* was described by the renowned student of stapeliads, N E Brown of Kew (Brown, 1910). Later, he published a coloured plate, a description and commentary on the species (Brown, 1914). He noted that the “plant was first met with in 1909 by Miss R. Leendertz, now Mrs. R. Pott, of the Transvaal Museum, growing among rocks near Heidelberg [south of Johannesburg] in the Transvaal. Here it occurs in sunny spots on rocks, where it forms large patches and flowers freely for a long period at the beginning of the year.”

In 1913 the living type plant of *S. leendertziae* was flowering at Kew and was photographed by Kew Curator C P Raffill, but at that time the photo was not published. Amazingly, a collection of whole-plate glass negatives was discovered at Kew in 1978 including the photo of the type plant of *S. leendertziae*. These negatives were drawn to my attention by Peter Brandham (Kew) and he helped to arrange a contact print of the image. This (Fig. 1) was then published for the first time in 1979 in *Asclepiadaceae* (later known as *Asklepios*) of which I was editor (Walker, 1979). Since that time, I have wanted to flower this species for myself; an aim I only achieved in 2021 after 42 years!

**Stapelia leendertziae flowering in cultivation**

My plant is about 25cm across, growing in a 12cm-diameter pan. The plant is typical of species of *Stapelia*. Its stems are up to 15cm long and 1.5cm across, well branched from the base, 4-angled bearing small erect teeth with tiny deciduous leaves, velvety-pubescent (covered with very short dense hairs) and mottled purple when...
grown in strong light, tapering towards the tip (Fig. 2).

The plant first flowered for me in August and September 2021 when it produced just a single flower. The bud (Fig. 2) has a prominent beak and the pedicel is 1.5cm long. The fully open flower is shown in side view in Fig. 3. The flower was tricky to photograph because the inside of the corolla is so dark, hence the use of illumination for some of the photos (Fig. 5). It has a large bell-shaped campanulate tube about 8cm long and 6.5cm diameter at the mouth. The inside and the outside of the flower are a uniformly rich burgundy, whilst the outside is also glossy with longitudinal veins. The inside tube is not shiny but finely rugulose (ridged) over the whole surface. The lobes are 4.5cm wide at the base and 5.5cm long with short hairs only on their edges. The flower has a strong aroma of over-ripened Brie or Camembert and I observed that the scent diminished overnight and was strongest late afternoon. The flower lasted for five days.

I also have a plant with cristate stems (Fig. 4) which has yet to oblige with flowers. This is quite a rare cristate in contrast to several other cristate stapeliads that are relatively common in cultivation.

**Relatives**

*Stapelia leendertziae* is the only *Stapelia* with such a large flower tube and indeed it is remarkable in the genus for its large and very conspicuous bell-shaped flower. Its closest relative is *Stapelia gigantea*, which has significantly larger flowers overall – up to 40cm in diameter in some clones – but these have a much shorter, shallower tube but with longer corolla lobes. *S. leendertziae* is, therefore, quite distinct from any other species.

**Stapelia leendertziae in habitat**

Plowes (1979) observed that “*S. leendertziae* appears to be very rare or localised in the wild.
I found a large old plant growing on quartzite on the ridge at its type locality at Heidelberg, Transvaal about 12–15 years ago. Until about two years ago this was the only gathering from the wild I have encountered in anyone’s collection – it is on every rockery in South Africa, but always the origin has been unknown. Mrs Doreen Court of Salisbury has now found it in the Blyde River Canyon, on the eastern edge of the Transvaal plateau between Lydenburg and the Kruger National Park”. More recent collections have been made, enabling its distribution range to be extended, but even so Bruyns (2005) records that “it is distinctly uncommon in the field and has not been collected often”. The species is now known to have a distribution in north-eastern South Africa and Eswatini (Swaziland). Bruyns notes further that it “always seems to grow on rocky ground, on slopes or on flat areas with shallow soils which are derived from sandstones or dolomite”.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:
Fig. 1 is reproduced courtesy of The Director, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. My wife Marjorie assisted with photography of the flower and read and commented on an earlier draft of this article.

LITERATURE: