



# AT HOME WITH CAPE PRIMROSES

With a long flowering period and numerous colourful  
Anne Swithinbank is enthralled by their range

cultivars, *Streptocarpus* are ideal house plants.  
and history. Photography by Tim Sandall

WITH THANKS TO DIBLEYS NURSERIES, DENBIGHSHIRE

Abundant flowers as seen on *Streptocarpus* 'Jessica' (below) make these plants a bright addition to any home. Most plants are 20–40cm (8–16in) wide

**TIME-PRESSURED LIFESTYLES** have made us demanding of our house plants. They should not be too difficult to grow, must last well and reward us with structural beauty or a profusion of bloom. Of flowering plants, *Streptocarpus* (Cape primrose) meet these criteria well and, as a result, have become hugely popular. It is hard to tire of a group of plants with such a wide range of jewel-like flower colours and patterns. If that was not enough, most plants bought in the UK are home-grown (and often bred) at Dibleys, a specialist nursery in Wales. I grow a new cultivar called *Streptocarpus* 'Eve', the long, elegant buds of which burst into fabulous, intricately patterned blooms in May.

As their common name suggests, *Streptocarpus* originate from southern Africa. They are part of the family *Gesneriaceae* which includes African violets, *Columnnea* and *Aeschynanthus*.

The first to be discovered, in 1818, was found near

Knysna, a town in the Western Cape familiar to those who have travelled the popular 'Garden Route'. Other species were found, and hybridization carried out over the years in the UK, Europe and in the USA (where the first fully double-flowered cultivar *S.* 'Rosebud' was bred) has given us the range of flower colours enjoyed now. They had been popular during Victorian times, but when I first started growing house plants in the 1960s there seemed to be just one blue-flowered cultivar and one pink doing the rounds. Today we can expect to find reds, blues, purples, whites and some with a large proportion of yellow, such as primrose *S.* 'Alissa' and *S.* 'Harlequin Blue' **1**, which won the RHS Chelsea 2010 Plant of the Year award.

## Interior designs

I have long enjoyed streptocarpus at home on windowsills, on shelves, as specimens large enough to dominate a side-board (*S.* 'Bethan' **4** and *S.* 'Gwen' are good examples) and

in a north-facing porch alongside ferns and lilies. Their flowering period is long, from spring through to autumn, although plants from the Crystal Series will bloom year-round. Among these, floriferous *S.* 'Crystal Ice' **5** has an abundance of white flowers with blue-veined throats. A notable hybrid is *S.* 'Tina' **9**, a good pink which freely produces masses of two-tone flowers on compact plants. Dibleys rates *S.* 'Bethan' as one of its best recent introductions; it is a neat plant producing plentiful sky-blue flowers with a tracing of purple on the lower lobes.

The tubular flowers of streptocarpus are, like orchids, foxgloves and nasturtiums, bilaterally symmetrical – if you cut them evenly in half at one point down their middle, you end up with pieces that are mirror images.

Leaves grow large and long, are brittle and so can be easily damaged. They also have the potentially worrying habit of dying off at the tips. To an extent this is natural, as being able to shut off the ends of their leaves and let them die is

how a streptocarpus naturally survives months of cold, dry weather. The remaining part attached to the plant is able to plump up and grow again when better weather returns. If brown on the tip offends, it does no harm to trim the ends.

## How to grow well

Although many plants are sold fully grown, you can order young plants to be sent through the post as 'plugs'. These will have been rooted as leaf cuttings and arrive ready to grow on. After soaking the roots, pot them into 9cm (3½in) pots of soilless compost (ideally three parts multipurpose compost and one part vermiculite) and they should be flowering within two months. Pot on progressively up to a 13–16cm (5–6in) pot.

*Streptocarpus* need good but not direct light. Too much scorches the foliage, and too little results in big, leafy plants with few blooms. East-facing windowsills, north-facing porches and shaded glasshouses are suitable homes. ►

## HOUSE SPECIALS

Boxed numbers in the text refer to the following selections of *Streptocarpus*

- 1** *Streptocarpus* 'Harlequin Blue'
- 2** *S.* 'Katie'
- 3** *S.* 'Black Panther'
- 4** *S.* 'Bethan'
- 5** *S.* 'Crystal Ice'
- 6** *S.* 'Charlotte'
- 7** *S.* 'Scarlett'
- 8** *S.* 'Tina'
- 9** *S.* 'Nia'
- 10** *S.* 'Chloe'
- 11** *S.* 'Harriet'
- 12** *S.* 'Pink Souffle'





## POPULAR HYBRIDS

Although *Streptocarpus* species are fun to grow and full of character, including those that only produce one gigantic leaf (unifoliate, which are trickier to cultivate than other types) and others with branched stems and small, almost succulent leaves (caulescent types, having a stem above ground), hybrids dominate those in cultivation. In form, hybrids are rosulate, meaning the leaves and flowers arise directly from a thick stock at the base, forming a rosette of growth at the top of their pot. Currently 28 *Streptocarpus* species and cultivars hold the RHS Award of Garden Merit (AGM).



***Streptocarpus* Crystal Series** has winter-flowering species in its ancestry, making it capable of blooming year round. This example, S. 'Crystal Beauty' (left), is an upright plant with dainty, narrow leaves offering a good display of clear blue flowers with purple veins. For winter flowers, keep plants at a minimum of 10°C (50°F) and in full sun from November to February.



***Streptocarpus* 'Kim'** is a compact plant (less than 38cm/15in wide), which makes it ideal for restricted spaces. An early-blooming cultivar, it is smothered with deep blue flowers, each with a white throat.



***Streptocarpus* 'Katie'** is remarkable for dark purple veins that trace intricate patterns over a pale lilac background. A strong, free-flowering cultivar introduced in 2007, it produces around eight flowers on each stem.



***Streptocarpus* (Roulette Series) 'Roulette Cherry'** has white blooms distinctively bordered by cherry red around the edge of the petal lobes. The Roulette Series has been bred at Fleischle Gartenbau in Germany.



***Streptocarpus* 'Leyla'** has large white flowers with strong purple veins on the lower lobes. The plant has a compact habit, mid-green leaves and flowers almost year round. Another introduction from Fleischle.

They thrive in typical house temperatures. Under glass, use shading and ventilation to reduce summer heat; in winter, aim for minimum 5°C (45°F) or bring plants indoors.

Water only when the surface of the compost begins to feel dry. I favour watering from the top but they are equally happy to take it up from below. Either way, do not let them sit in water for more than 10 minutes. Always water under the foliage because their leaves are prone to ugly scorch marks if sunlight catches water splashed on leaves.

### Potential problems

Streptocarpus are not particularly prone to pests and diseases but watch out for aphids clustering on the flower stalks. Slugs can cause damage in glasshouses and porches. Fluffy white masses on leaves are mealybugs; white fluff on the roots is caused by root mealybugs. Flecking on flowers is the work of western flower thrip. Vine weevil larvae are occasionally troublesome but, once anticipated, can be controlled either chemically or using biological control. Observation, identification and a rapid response will help keep streptocarpus healthy.

After a plant has been in the same compost for four to six weeks, it will need feeding while in active growth (usually from February to November). Use a weak dilution of high-potash feed, such as tomato food, fortnightly at first but weekly when plants are growing fast.

Although plants are potentially long-lived, they do best in pots no larger than 15cm (6in) across. Rex Dibley (founder of the nursery) likes to replace his plants after just one year but, at home, a life span of three years is realistic.

I will always have a few streptocarpus among my house plants as their character, willingness to flower and ability to withstand short periods of neglect are hard to beat. ■

*Anne Swithinbank*, gardening writer and broadcaster, is a former Glasshouse Supervisor at RHS Garden Wisley



## PROPAGATING STREPTOCARPUS

Streptocarpus are simple to grow and will multiply freely from leaf cuttings. When propagating, ideally keep above 20°C (68°F).



**1** Cut a healthy leaf in two either side of its midrib; discard midrib. Insert leaves edgeways, 2.5cm (1in) deep, into 50:50 soilless compost and vermiculite



**2** Cover with polythene and keep out of direct light; it will take a couple of months to root and sprout. Grow on until plantlets are large enough to pot up

### Suppliers:

- **Dibleys Nurseries**, Llanellidan, Ruthin, Denbighshire LL15 2LG; 01978 790677; [www.dibleys.com](http://www.dibleys.com)
- **Special Plants**, Hill Farm Barn, Greenways Lane, Cold Ashton, Chippenham, Wiltshire SN14 8LA; 01225 891686; [www.specialplants.net](http://www.specialplants.net)

### National Plant Collections:

- **Dibleys Nurseries** (above); open 10am–5pm, Apr–Aug daily, Mar, Sep & Oct Mon–Fri
- **Mrs K Williams**, Brambly Hedge, Mill Lane, Sway, Hampshire SO1 8LN; 01590 683570; open Jul–Aug by appointment only

### British Streptocarpus Society

[www.streptocarpusociety.org.uk](http://www.streptocarpusociety.org.uk)

### RHS Garden Wisley

has a display of streptocarpus in The Glasshouse during August. [www.rhs.org.uk/wisley](http://www.rhs.org.uk/wisley)