

Pterodiscus, interesting dwarf caudiciforms

Ralph Peckover

The genus *Pterodiscus* (family Pedaliaceae, the sesame family), which has winged seeds like the tree genus *Combretum*, occurs in all types of climatic areas in Southern Africa as well as further north.

The classification of this genus appears to encompass half a dozen or so species, with some species having an underground caudex, e.g. *P. speciosus* and *P. aurantiacus*, while others have the caudex mainly above the soil, e.g. *P. ngamicus*.

The size of plants of the different species varies from 100 mm up to 200 mm and can become quite fat, reminding one of a miniature Baobab. During autumn the annual flowering shoots will die back to the caudex and commence growth again in spring.

Different species grow in different soil types with two distinct species growing in heavy clay soils. On the Makatini flats, a species with yellow flowers thrives together with a *Euphorbia* sp., *Ceropegia nilotica*, *C. rendallii* and *Huernia zebrina*. In open areas near Pretoria, *Pterodiscus speciosus* is found together with *C. pachystelma* and *C. multiflora*.

P. aurantiacus with its pretty orange flowers from Namibia was observed in a sandy soil in quite lush surroundings while another species with an underground caudex was seen near Kadooma in Zimbabwe in a loamy, sandy soil in mixed mopani veld. This species has a reddish-purple flower with a yellowish throat.

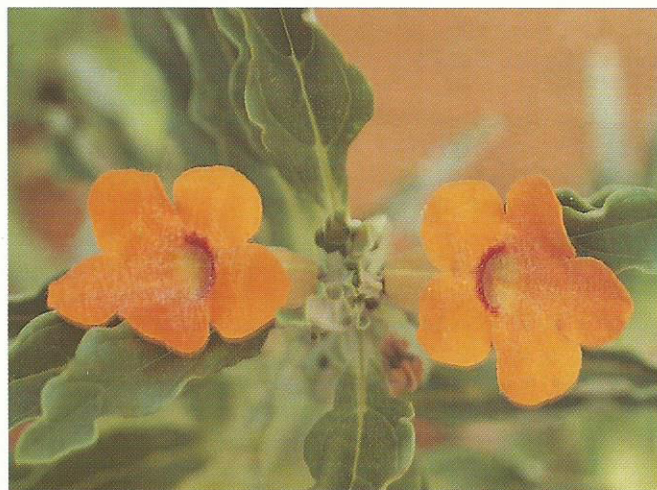
The Great Karoo is home to a species with small pink tubular flowers. The leaves of this species are grey-green and toothed and found growing in association with *Hoodia gordonii* and *Adeinium oleifolium* in alkaline, gravelly soils near Upington and is also seen near Orania.

Most species grow well in cultivation in well-drained, fertile soil mixtures although too nutrient-rich soils will produce plants with too lanky stems. Regular watering will allow the stems to grow and produce flowers at the petiole base over many months. The attractive four-winged seeds develop after pollination, this being enacted by solitary bees and various flies.

In the accompanying slides, the strikingly colourful and quite large flowers (up to 50 mm across) vary from light yellow through orange, pink and almost to magenta.



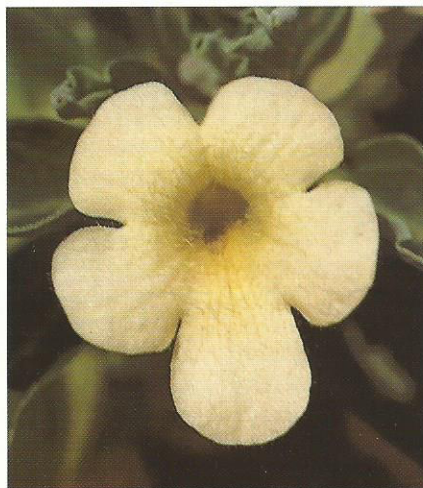
P. ngamicus can have attractive, smallish brown and yellow flowers.



The pretty orange flowers of *P. aurantiacus* from Namibia.



Large \pm 50 mm diameter flower of *P. speciosus* from near Pretoria.



The yellow flowers of a *Pterodiscus* sp. from the Makatini flats in Northern KwaZulu-Natal.



A large red flower with a yellow throat characterises this *Pterodiscus* species from Zimbabwe.