

PTERODISCUS SPECIES

In southern Africa, an asset for the water wise garden

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The genus *Pterodiscus* is found in southern Africa and further north into tropical Africa. A little-studied genus from the Sesame family (Pedaliaceae), it is related to Devil's Claws, the southern African genus *Harpagophytum*, which has similar shaped flowers and deciduous annual stems. The main distinguishing characteristics of *Pterodiscus* include: their four-winged fruits, resembling those of Bushwillows (*Combretum*); a pungent scent from glands on the leaf surfaces; and, a soap-like substance when the leaves are rubbed.

Some species, including the Sandkambroo (*Pterodiscus speciosus*) and another from Zimbabwe, have subterranean caudexes (stems) while others, such as *P. luridus* and *P. ngamicus*, have quite a large, swollen, above-ground caudex that resemble miniature Baobabs.

The leaves of most *Pterodiscus* species are bright green with a wavy margin. Species from dry areas, like the Great Karoo, have serrated leaves with a geometrical pattern.

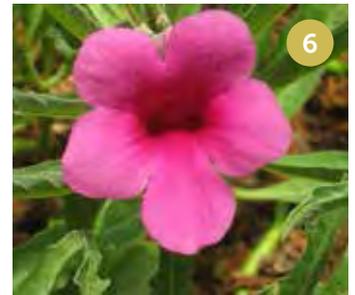
The flower colour of species is greatly varied, with some species having strikingly bright colours.

During spring, annual stems grow from the caudex and develop sets of opposite leaves. At the base of the leaves, of *P. aurantiacus* for example, are two distinct glands, known as extrafloral nectaries, as well as a flower bud. These glands give off a nectar-like substance that attracts large ants, which I have observed pollinating the flowers.

When the plants grow strongly, continuous sets of flowers develop along each stem right through to autumn when the plants become dormant. The four-winged seed capsules mature sequentially and, while still green, fall onto the soil where they dry. Wind blows them to suitable niches to germinate, but only when conditions are perfect. If freshly dried capsules are planted, almost no seed germinates the first year. This is very similar to Devil's Claw seeds, which also have a very low germination rate. It is possible, even likely, that the tough seed capsule inhibits germination until conditions are ideal for germination. However, various seed treatments, including storage, can improve the germination rate. When germination is successful, seedlings do grow rapidly and during the first year the plants can flower and set seed.



Pterodiscus species hybridise readily, leading to very attractive hybrid plants with a wonderful assortment of colours, ranging from white to deep red. This genus shows great promise for use in small gardens and rockeries and even as potential Bonsai plants. Their striking colours and long flowering period, combined with drought-resistance, make them perfect water wise gardening subjects.



OPPOSITE PAGE: *Pterodiscus sp. nova*, from Makatini in Kwazulu-Natal.

1: Swollen caudex of *Pterodiscus luridus*.

2: Thickened caudex of *Pterodiscus ngamicus*.

3: Leaf shape and orientation of *Pterodiscus luridus*.

4: *Pterodiscus luridus* leaf shape and flowers.

5: A striking, red *Pterodiscus sp. nova* (recently discovered and not yet described or named) from Tzaneen.

6: *Pterodiscus speciosus*.

7: *Pterodiscus aurantiacus* flower and extrafloral nectaries – the black dots at the leaf bases.

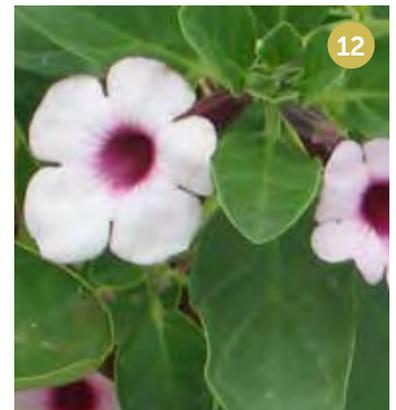
8: The four-winged fruits of a *Pterodiscus* species.

9: *Pterodiscus elliottii* from Zimbabwe.

10: *Pterodiscus ngamicus*.

11: *Pterodiscus ngamicus* from Rust in Limpopo Province.

12: An unidentified *Pterodiscus* species from Tanzania.





THIS PAGE: A selection of *Pterodiscus* hybrids. All photos are by the author.