

Wildflowers of Waikumete

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Throughout our lives, we carry certain memories of landscapes (both real and imagined). Many of these come to represent romantic or idealised places, and resonate deeply within us. They can be natural landscapes, flower gardens of our youth, pasture or wastelands (amongst others). As a child, I was raised on stories like 'Wind in the Willows', which filled my head with idyllic visions of woodland and meadow that will always retain a magical charm for me (despite, or rather in addition to, my subsequently developed passion for New Zealand's native flora).

It is perhaps surprising to some that one should find such an experience within a cemetery. However, Waikumete Cemetery is no ordinary place. From its early days, wildflowers (many of South African origin) have spread from around gravesites into the pasture to create a dream-like space, as they erupt into flower during the later months of the year. The result, as the eminent Auckland botanist, Alan Esler, describes it, is "a wonderland of intermingled plants from three separate regions of the world"².

Furthermore, it should not necessarily come as a surprise that romantic scenes of this nature are able to develop within a cemetery. Cemeteries are often unfettered by the never-ending renewal and control that we impose upon our other man-made spaces; a characteristic that some cemeteries share with wastelands. In this way, Waikumete has been permitted to form a kind of 'second nature', in which indigenous and exotic elements have combined to form new ecologies and aesthetics.

Although not indigenous, the presence of so many of these South African flowers growing in wild associations has been recognised as being of

significance – and part of the old cemetery area has been made a wildflower sanctuary. From my personal perspective, what makes these communities special is that many (although not all) of the wildflowers within them are not aggressive environmental weeds, yet persist and co-exist with native and pasture species, thereby forming a hybrid landscape.

There is an interesting network of species throughout, with some wildflowers (like *Ixia polystachya*; Fig. 1) somewhat ubiquitous, while others occur sporadically or in isolated groupings. The bright orange flowers of *Tritonia crocata* (Fig. 2) are low-growing highlights, popping up relatively irregularly between graves. In its wild habitat (in southern parts of South Africa's Cape Province), this diminutive bulb grows predominantly on clay slopes, in a type of shrubland called *renosterveld*³.



Fig. 1 *Ixia polystachya* (variable *ixia*), a native to the northwest and southwest Cape of South Africa, with white, pink, mauve, or bluish flowers.



Fig. 2 *Tritonia crocata*, a native to the southern part of the Western Cape of South Africa, with bright orange flowers.

The chinchinchee⁴, *Ornithogalum thyrsoides* (Fig. 3), comes from areas to the west of *Tritonia crocata*'s natural range in South Africa, where it grows in low-lying, often marshy habitats. Traditionally, it has been a popular garden bulb within New Zealand, valued for its dense heads of white flowers with dark centres. At Waikumete, chinchinchee occurs in isolated pockets around particular graves.



Fig. 3 *Ornithogalum thyrsoides* (chinchinchee, star-of-Bethlehem or wonder-flower), a native to the south-western Cape of South Africa, with white, long-lasting flowers.

Ixia paniculata (Fig. 4) (formerly known as *Morphixia paniculata*) is an unusual species of *Ixia*, whose arrangements of peculiar pink flowers remind me (very loosely) of some types of basket fungus, when viewed amongst the grass. This native of western parts of the Cape is also, like chinchinchee, present in isolated groupings around graves.

The delicate pink onion (Fig. 5) is *Allium roseum* ssp. *bulbiferum*, a small species that occurs in much of Europe, and where Asia and Africa meet with Europe. I have only observed it surrounding one grave, where it is well established, although it probably grows elsewhere in the cemetery. Although it is no doubt present in old gardens,

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² From *Wild Plants in Auckland* by A. Esler (2004). Auckland University Press, Auckland.

³ This translates, intriguingly, as 'rhinoceros field'; a name that may have been derived from a high incidence of rhinoceros within this vegetation type (when they were still to be found in the Cape), or indirectly from the name of a shrub that is one of its dominant components, *renosterbos* (rhinoceros bush).

⁴ I've always wondered about this name. It is apparently derived from the Afrikaans word 'tjienkerientjee', which refers to a sound that the stems on this bulb make when rubbed together.

I have not seen this beautiful species growing before, and I was impressed by its comparatively contained nature, in contrast to other *Allium* spp., like onion weed, *Allium triquetrum*.

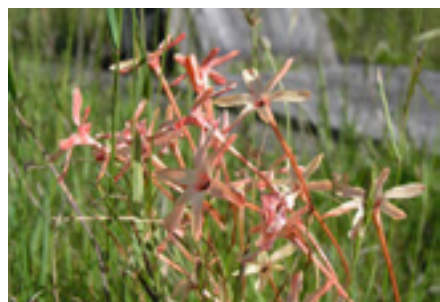


Fig. 4 *Ixia paniculata* (angel's trumpets), a native to the northwest and the southwest Cape of South Africa, with creamy flowers flushed with reddish pink.

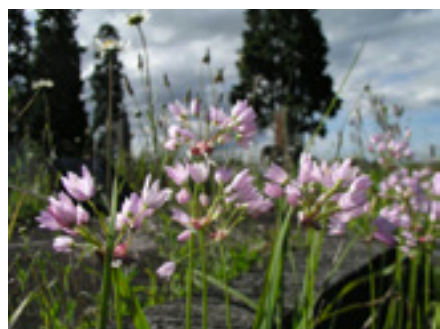


Fig. 5 *Allium roseum* (rosy garlic), a native to the Mediterranean Basin, with pale pink flowers.

As mentioned previously, *Ixia polystachya* (an upright species occurring in many different shades of white, pink and mauve) is widespread throughout much of the older parts of the cemetery. This South African species grows in a range of habitats from the coast to the mountains in the Western Cape. Also common throughout much of the old cemetery areas, although on a different tier, is a small purple-flowered species, *Babiana angustifolia* (Fig. 6), which is a reasonably common bulb within older gardens in Auckland. In South Africa, this grows in damp habitats of *renosterveld* (where it is Nationally Threatened due to habitat loss), while at Waikumete it is frequently found near the edges of tracks, graves and roads where sufficient light is available.

Other desirable bulb species that are to be found in Waikumete's wildflower meadows include *Ixia maculata*, *Sparaxis* spp., *Freesia refracta*, a *Romulea* sp., *Tritonia gladiolaris* (syn. *T. lineata*; Fig. 7), *Scilla peruviana* and a dwarf daffodil, *Narcissus*

bulbocodium. In addition to these, ox-eye daisies (*Leucanthemum vulgare*; Fig. 8) contribute significantly to the character of the area.



Fig. 6 *Babiana angustifolia* (baboon flower), a native to the northwest and southwest Cape of South Africa, with blue and purple flowers.

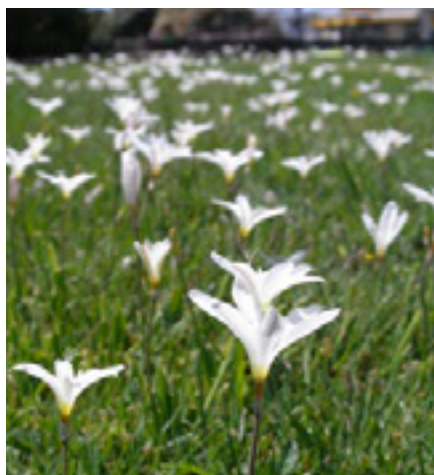


Fig. 7 *Tritonia gladiolaris*, a native to the south-eastern Cape of South Africa, with creamy white, pale yellow, or orange flowers.



Fig. 8 *Leucanthemum vulgare* (ox-eye daisy), a native to Europe and the temperate regions of Asia, with flower heads that have white florets and yellow centres.

Unfortunately, some of the bulbous species that were previously planted at Waikumete are undesirable, having established themselves as noisome weeds here and elsewhere

(including *Aristea ecklonii* and certain *Watsonia* spp.). Controlling the presence of these is a necessary aspect of maintaining the future of Waikumete's wildflowers. At present, they do not play a significant role in large tracts of the most interesting areas.

Exotic species of the kinds described previously are not the only significant wildflowers present at Waikumete. There are more than 20 species of native orchids that grow naturally amongst native scrub within the cemetery's boundaries, many of which are rare or threatened. Depending on which names are accepted, the rich representation of native orchid genera includes *Corunastylis*, *Corybas*, *Diplodium*, *Gastrodia*, *Microtis*, *Orthoceras*, *Petalochilus*, *Plumatochilus*, *Pterostylis*, *Singularibas*, *Stegostyla* and *Thelymitra*. In addition to these, Waikumete is also home to two rare native grasses, *Dichelachne inaequiglumis* and *Paspalum orbiculare*, an uncommon liane, *Calystegia marginata*, and the nationally endangered herb, *Picris burbridgeae*⁵.

Quite aside from specific plants, certain areas of Waikumete Cemetery also contain locally significant ecologies, most importantly scrub/gumland ecologies. Notable amongst these is the presence of considerable numbers of *Dracophyllum sinclairii*. In comparison to some of the forested areas protected within the Waitakeres and elsewhere within the region, Auckland does not have many of these open ecologies left. However, the incursion of weeds, and plans for significant areas of new grave sites, pose threats to these vestiges of Auckland's past.

The diversity of both exotic and native species found within Waikumete Cemetery is an example of the way in which some seemingly unlikely places can act as repositories for our natural and horticultural heritage. And as spring rolls around each year, we are reminded of this in a spectacular manner – as one of Auckland's most beautiful flowering displays starts up once again.

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⁵ See for example: *Waikumete Cemetery: Threatened and uncommon plant survey and management report*. October 2001, prepared for Waitakere City Council by Natural Resource Assessors [P. J. de Lange & G. Crocroft].