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# Aloe kniphofioides

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## Aloe kniphofioides Baker

**Family:** Asphodelaceae

**Common names:** grass aloe, red poker grass aloe (Eng.);  
grasaalwyn (Afr.)

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*Aloe kniphofioides* is an attractive, stemless, grass-like aloe, with short serrated leaves and an ovoid, bulb-like swellir below ground. The lax inflorescence and distinct bulb of this species distinguish it from all other southern African alo



### Description

*Aloe kniphofioides* is an indigenous succulent plant from the *Aloe* group that grows in the Grassland Biome. *A. kniphofioides* has a bulb-like swelling below ground and fusiform roots, forming an ovoid shape. This aloe can be confused for a grass in the grassland because of its grass-like leaves. It has thin serrated leaves, multifarious, about 200–300

long, 6–7 mm broad. This species has cigar- to pencil-shaped, scarlet flowers that are borne on an elongated flower of up to 550 mm long, standing out above the leaf apices.



*Aloe kniphofioides* is easily distinguished from other aloes by its distinctive underground bulb-like structures and the and narrow leaves. The only other South African aloes with bulbous bases are *Aloe inconspicua* and *A. modesta*. But species have red and yellow flowers respectively.

*Aloe kniphofioides* flowers in late spring to early summer, between November and December. In late summer and au after flowering, it produces seeds that are 2–3 mm in diameter.

### Conservation Status

*Aloe kniphofioides* is assessed as [Vulnerable \(VU\)](#) in its natural habitat. Loss of habitat is the major cause of this conservation status. The species population has reduced by at least 30% based on a 42% loss of habitat as a result of afforestation, inappropriate fire management, loss of pollinators, coal mining and alien plant invasion, over the past 5 years. Grassland habitat in Mpumalanga and Northern KwaZulu-Natal, where the species naturally occur is 37%

transformed, whereas grassland habitat in the Eastern Cape is 55% transformed, bringing the total transformation of grasslands, where the species occurs, to 42%.

The grassland habitat for *Aloe kniphofioides* is ideally suited for forestry, and the loss of habitat to forestry has also caused a great decline of pollinators, which is also impacting the population of the species. This species depends on fires for flowering. With forestry activities, grassland is either not burnt, or burnt too frequently in fire breaks, preventing young seedlings from establishing. In some areas, like Mpumalanga, the habitat has been disturbed, if not completely lost, because of coal mining. Alien species have taken over the open grasslands, further reducing the suitable habitat for the species.



### **Distribution and habitat**

*Aloe kniphofioides* is known to naturally occur in northern KwaZulu-Natal grassland, southern Mpumalanga grassland in the northeast of the Eastern Cape.

This indigenous, late spring-flowering aloe is distributed in the Grassland Biome. They grow at high altitude, generally between 1 200 and 1 500 m, in hilly and mountainous areas, occurring in stony ground and damp grass places. Summ

temperatures are moderate to warm, whereas frost occurs in winter. These are summer rainfall regions, depending on localities, averaging from 750 to 1 250 mm per annum.

### Derivation of name and historical aspects

With over 500 known species in the *Aloe* genus, it is a well-represented genus in the Asphodelaceae family in south Africa. *Aloe* genus has a long history of use in Africa, particularly for assorted pharmaceutical purposes.

The name aloe is from the Greek *alsos* and refers to the bitter juice from the leaves of these plants. It is probably derived from the earlier Arabic word *alloe* or the Hebrew word *allal*, both meaning 'bitter'. Grass-like upright leaves of *Aloe kniphofioides* and its striking bright flowers on an elongated flower stalk resembles features of the *Kniphofia* genus, *kniphofioides*, meaning 'like *Kniphofia*' as the species name of this aloe.

### Ecology

*Aloe kniphofioides* is a grassland aloe and, therefore, fire is essential to the survival of *A. kniphofioides*. With its bulb-roots and succulent nature, the plants survive the fires and resprout. The flowering is prolific after fire, attracting a great number of pollinators. Some of the significant pollinators are Sunbirds (species of *Nectarinia*). There are now fewer Sunbirds because of extensive monoculture of eucalyptus and pine trees. Consequently, the seed set has been poor in recent years, with few to no seedlings or young plants in the populations.



### Uses

With its upright leaves and racemes of striking orange-red to scarlet flowers, *Aloe kniphofioides* is a beautiful plant. In cultivation, it is mostly planted in earthenware containers as a pot plant in display gardens. In mass planting, they are planted in between large rocks. With its bright flowers it can be used to attract birds in the garden.



### Growing Aloe kniphofioides

Like many species of the *Aloe* genus, *Aloe kniphofioides* should be grown in a well drained soil. They thrive in a mix of one third sandy soil, one third river sand or fine gravel and one third very well-rotted compost. Finely sieved peat moss can be used instead of compost. *A. kniphofioides* grow best in earthenware containers as they absorb any excess moisture after irrigating. This plant should be grown in a position of morning sunlight or light dappled shade. In summer rainfall the plant can also be cultivated in a rockery provided that the position has deep soil and it is well drained, as it is there in its natural habitat. In midwinter, late July or early August, dry veld grass should be heaped around the dead leaves of adult plants and ignited. It should be regularly watered afterwards. The burning usually stimulates flower bud formation a few weeks later.

The plant should be well watered throughout spring and summer. Watering should be reduced and the plants kept completely dry during the winter months.

*Aloe kniphofioides* rarely sets any seed in cultivation. It needs hand pollination while the plants are in flower. Seeds should be sown in the late spring. Scatter them on the soil surface of deep seed trays or earthenware pots and lightly cover with soil. The bottom of the container has to be filled with a coarse drainage medium. Seeds are sown in the same mixture for propagation of adult plants. Soil should be kept moist throughout the germination period and for the remainder of summer while the seedlings are developing. They should be kept dry and in a cool, shaded place for the duration of the winter. Seedlings of *Aloe kniphofioides* are usually ready for transplanting at the beginning of the third growing season.

### References

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Mpho Mathalauga  
KwaZulu-Natal National Botanical Garden  
November 2019

### Plant Attributes:

**Plant Type:** Bulb,  
Succulent

**SA Distribution:** Eastern  
Cape, KwaZulu-Natal,  
Mpumalanga

**Soil type:** Sandy, Loam

**Flowering season:** Spring,  
Early Summer

**PH:**

**Flower colour:** Red,  
Orange

**Aspect:** Full Sun

**Gardening skill:**  
Challenging

### Special Features:



Attracts birds



Good potplant

### Horticultural zones



**Zone 1 Coastal summer  
rainfall, frost free**

**Zone 5 Bushveld summer  
rainfall, Light frost**

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