

Red Hot Pokers

Kniphofia

Red Hot Pokers, *Kniphofia* species, are often teamed with blue *Agapanthus* and blue or white *Hydrangea* in Christmas floral decorations. The tall, upright, spikes of brightly coloured flowers in red, yellow or orange provide a brilliant contrast to the soft pastels of the other flowers. The plants grow in clumps, with sturdy, leathery, strappy leaves and nectar-rich flowers on long stems, elevated high above the foliage, ideally placed for foraging bees and sunbirds. Horticultural specimens in North America are pollinated by orioles and hummingbirds.



Kniphofia uvaria in the Cederberg Mountains of South Africa. Photo: Rupert Koopman



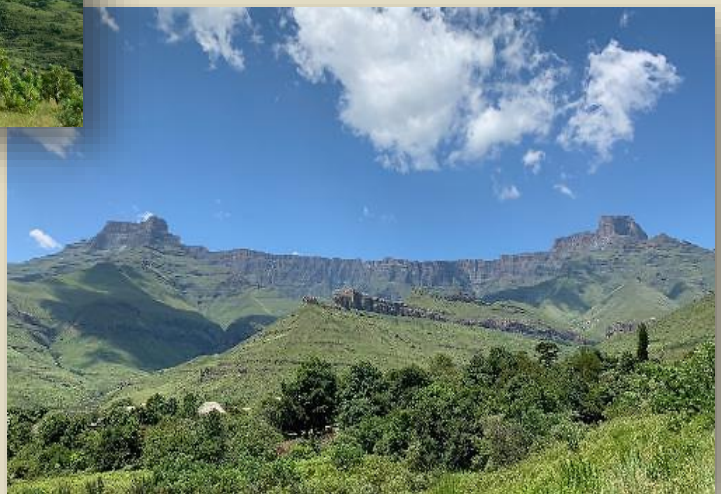
Kniphofia uvaria in the Cederberg Mountains of South Africa. Photo: Rupert Koopman

There are about 71 species of *Kniphofia* and apart from two species from Madagascar and Yemen, all are native to Africa. They are distributed across a wide range of 'biomes' from the Mediterranean



Kniphofia – Red Hot Pokers – distribution in Africa, Madagascar and Yemen. Map modified from Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, Plants of the World Online.

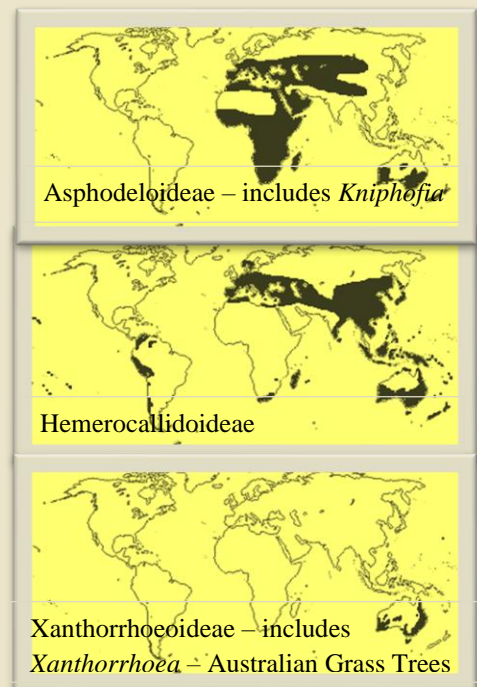
climate of southern Africa to the tropics, savannah and more arid north but most *Kniphofia* species grow in moist temperate montane grassland, with the centre of diversity in the Drakensberg region of South Africa. With their vibrant colours, it is unsurprising that many species are prized world-wide as garden plants. They also hybridise readily, so there are many crosses between species that have parentage that is difficult to determine.



The Drakensberg Mountains of South Africa are the centre of diversity for *Kniphofia* – Red Hot Pokers. Photographs: Karen Marais

Kniphofia belongs in the plant family Asphodelaceae, widely distributed throughout tropical and temperate regions of the world. The family is divided into three *subfamilies* including *Asphodeloideae* (includes *Kniphofia*) and *Hemerocallidoideae* but the third *subfamily*, *Xanthorrhoeoideae*, has surprised us because it includes only one genus (*Xanthorrhoea*), which incorporates our familiar Australian native grass trees. Until recently, *Xanthorrhoea* fell into its own family – the Xanthorrhoeaceae – but now enjoys familial links to its African relatives!

Finally, pronunciation of the name *Kniphofia* is challenging. German botanist Conrad Moench named it for a countryman, physician and botanist, Johann Hieronymus Kniphof. Being German, the correct pronunciation does not silence the ‘K’; it is *K-nip-pof-fia*.



Missouri Botanical Garden:

<https://www.mobot.org/MOBOT/research/APweb/orders/asparagalesweb.htm#Asphodelaceae>

Ramdhani S. 2006. *Evolutionary and Biogeographic Studies in the genus Kniphofia Moench (Asphodelaceae)*. Thesis submitted for degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Rhodes University.

Ramdhani S, Barker N P, Baijnath H. 2009. Rampant nonmonophyly of species in *Kniphofia* Moench (Asphodelaceae) suggests a recent Afromontane radiation. *Taxon*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tax.584008>

Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, Plants of the World Online:

<https://powo.science.kew.org/taxon/urn:lsid:ipni.org:names:331220-2>

Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kniphofia>

Wikipedia: [Asphodelaceae - Wikipedia](#)



Kniphofia uvaria in the Cederberg Mountains of South Africa.
Photo: Rupert Koopman

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