

Haworthia springbokvlakensis: cultivation tips from nature

Ivor Crook and Ian G Robinson

Seeing how plants grow in habitat can be really beneficial in understanding their cultural requirements, and an appreciation of the geology of an area will often pay dividends. Photography as indicated.

The first description of *Haworthia springbokvlakensis* was made by Colonel Charles L Scott in 1970. This species is most commonly known in habitat from Springbokvlakte farm near Steytlerville in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, overlooked by Cockscomb mountain. The site, of approximately one hectare, consists of a low hill, sloping on all sides to flat, lower boundaries all around. It is now surrounded by a fence which was funded by the German Cactus Society and the plants are thus protected from the farm's goat population (Fig. 1). It is the furthest east of the 'retuse' haworthias. Many people studying the genus consider it to be closest to *Haworthia emelyae* (*picta*), though that tends to have sharp points to the

leaf tips. Some forms of *Haworthia bayeri* that can be found a similar distance from Springbokvlakte farm as *H. emelyae*, frequently have leaves with blunt tips and with a similar patterning and colouration. It is interesting to note that *Haworthia decipiens* grows slightly higher up the same hill (Fig. 2). *H. springbokvlakensis* is often considered to be choice by enthusiasts, not only because of its beauty but also because it can be difficult to obtain and grow well.

We were fortunate to visit Springbokvlakte farm along with David Cumming in late October 2014. Initially we searched halfway up the small rise and found nothing, then at the bottom of the slope, to the western corner of the site, where any moisture might run to, we found a small number of healthy plants,

Fig. 1 General view of the site with the fence visible and Cockscomb mountain in the distance (Photo: Ivor Crook)





Fig. 2 *Haworthia decipens* in the same location, higher up the hill (Photo: Ivor Crook)



Fig. 3 *H. springbokvlakensis* as sighted just by the inflorescence (Photo: Ian Robinson)

signalled by flower spikes arising from beneath the stones which covered the area (Figs. 3–6). Some plants seemed to be growing in complete darkness. In common with many haworthias, *H. springbokvlakensis* has succulent roots. It was the end of the dry season when we visited and it is likely that the plants had been seasonally pulled down into this position by their contractile roots to prevent excessive water loss.

Fig. 4 The same plant uncovered (Photo: Ian Robinson)

During the trip, one of us (Ian) stated that he had experienced some difficulty in growing the plants until he started adding limestone to his potting mix. On examining geological maps of the area it can be seen that most of the coastal belt between Cape Town and Port Elizabeth is Cape Sandstone. However, there is a small intrusion of limestone rock heading inland from around Jeffreys Bay which lies to the west of Port Elizabeth. The Cockscomb mountain and Springbokvlakte farm both lie on this finger of limestone.





Fig. 5 A different plant growing completely under rocks with just the flower spike showing (Photo: Ian Robinson)

Fig. 6 *Haworthia springbokvlakensis* uncovered and with inflorescence (Photo: Ivor Crook)



Both authors now routinely add limestone to the potting mix for this species and have found that they grow significantly better. This shows that to grow a plant well, many factors have to be taken into account, such as the climatic conditions of where it grows. Consequently, knowledge of the temperature, the amount and season of rainfall and temperature ranges are important. However, it is also important to check the geology of the local area in order to create the optimum soil chemistry to encourage good growth. A further factor to consider for domestic cultivation is that in habitat the plants were at the 'moist point' of the site, which in effect means a low point on the site to which water drains, leaving it moister than areas higher up. This might suggest that they do not have a totally dry period. Ian Robinson has since followed up on this idea with, he feels, satisfactory results. This, added to the fact that Springbokvlakte farm is towards the Eastern Cape, which means predominantly summer rainfall, may add further to the requirements for cultivation in the greenhouse.

Editor's note:

Many *Haworthia* enthusiasts use the term 'retuse haworthias' to refer to those species having fat and thickened leaves that are effectively cut off at the top on the diagonal. This is botanically incorrect and it should be noted that the botanical definition of retuse is: notched or with a rounded indentation of the leaf apex.

LITERATURE:

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Email:

Ivor Crook: ivor.crook@btinternet.com
 Ian Robinson: igandjm.r@gmail.com
 Layout by Phil Crewe