

Aloe mitriformis Miller and its relatives

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Within the genus *Aloe*, the “Mitriformis group” is composed of a few taxa which are considered subspecies of *Aloe mitriformis*. In fact, there is an intergradation between them which means that some plants will tend to look more like *Aloe comptonii* while they are still considered *Aloe mitriformis*; this explains in part the confusions that we know, but also the cause of these confusions, for the extreme variability of this taxon to which a large number of varieties have been attributed. Not to mention hybrids!

We have here, a taxon, *Aloe mitriformis* Miller 1768, from South Africa, Western Cape. This species has been synonymized without explanation by Glen & Hardy under *Aloe perfoliata*, which has nothing to do with it (see illustration below, left); according to Mottram (2013), it would rather be *Aloe microstigma*, but the reality is that this name of “perfoliata” has been used so much for various taxa having nothing to do with each other that it is better to forget it. He is, however, the type of the *Aloe* genus!



Aloe perfoliata, Vietz, F.B., *Icones plantarum medico-oecologico-technicarum*, vol. 1: t. 13 (1800).

Aloe mitriformis, Dillenius, *Hortus Elthamensis*. 21, F.19, t.17, (1732) the first illustration.

So back to our *Aloe mitriformis*. In his 1982 edition of Aloes from South Africa, Reynolds refers to considerable confusion with identical names for different forms and different names like *A. xanthacantha* for the same form, adding that it would be wise to consider *Aloe mitriformis* as a variable species, rather than attempting to give it other names for forms not even recognizable in South Africa's own localities.

The variability is found in the description, *A. mitriformis* being described as a species essentially creeping and spreading in different directions, but which can also be erect, when the rosettes are dense. The **leaves** are glaucous green to green (dark green in Bot. Mag. t.1270 of 1810), practically without spots, the **margins** are adorned with white teeth at the base, becoming yellow to golden yellow towards the tip; the lower surface is slightly keeled, with 4-6 teeth; the sap is yellow in colour when it dries. The **inflorescence** is branched (2-5 branches), the raceme is capitate, dense, flattened to slightly rounded at the apex, and also short and broadly conical, the **flowers** are dull scarlet.

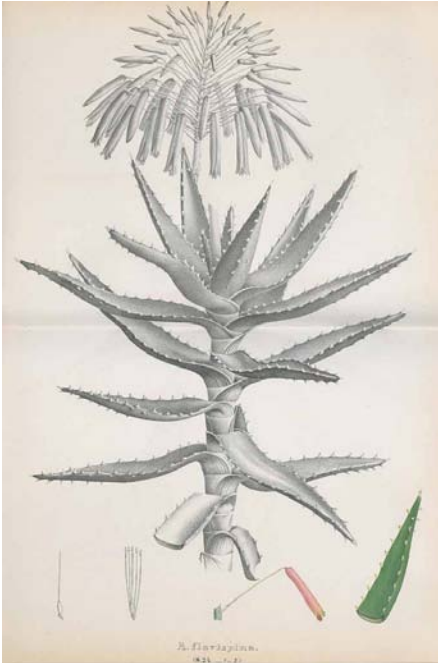


Aloe mitriformis, Salm-Dyck, Monogr. gen. Al. sect.24, 4, fasc.6, fig.10 (1856).



The supposed *Aloe mitriformis* in cultivation, but corresponding to the description. Coll. J.L.

For all that I have just recalled, *Aloe comptonii*, which intergrades with *A. mitriformis*, can resemble the latter so much that it gives its glaucous-green complexion and prostrate appearance to many populations which challenge us, and make it particularly difficult the separation between the two taxa, except in their extremes. However, Reynolds separated the two taxa by creating this new entity found in the Eastern Karoo, and naming it in honour of Prof. R.H. Compton, then director of the National Botanic Gardens at Kirstenbosch.



Aloe flavispina, Salm-Dyck, Monogr. gen. Al. sect.24, fasc.4, fig.9 (1842) referring to *Aloe comptonii*.

Currently considered a subspecies of *A. mitriformis*, *A. comptonii* is a species with a short stem, more or less erect, the **leaves** are more or less broad, lanceolate, bluish to glaucous green, unspotted, the **margins** are adorned with pale yellow teeth (hence the old name *A. flavispina*) to pale brown; the **sap** is orange in color when it dries. The **inflorescence** is branched (usually 3-5, but up to 8 branches), the raceme is paniculate, dense, broadly conical, the **flowers** have a long pedicel, and are more or less bright scarlet with a yellow tip.



Aloe mitriformis subsp. *comptonii* in cultivation, coll. JL.

Aloe distans is undoubtedly the most easily recognized of the group; considered a subspecies of *A. mitriformis*, *Aloe distans* is a rare plant in the Cape Province, its habitat being restricted to a narrow coastal belt.

Aloe distans or *mitriformis* subsp. *distans* as we want to call it (both names are valid and are a taxonomic choice), has an ascending habit, sometimes kept erect among dense vegetation or rosettes, less strong than *A. mitriformis*, elongated and rapidly creeping with adventitious roots; the **leaves** are distributed along the stem, erect, shortly lanceolate, dull green to glaucous green, the underside is convex, with some irregularly distributed spots, subtuberculate, whitish; the **margins** are cartilaginous, adorned with deltoid teeth, whitish to pale golden yellow; the **inflorescence** has 3-4 branches, is capitate, more or less flattened at the top, the **flowers** are pale orange to scarlet red, decurved.



Aloe distans, Salm-Dyck, Monogr. gen. Al. sect.24, 1, fasc.6, fig.8 (1854).



Aloe mitriformis subsp. *distans* in cultivation, coll. JL

Finally, we will end with the famous *Aloe nobilis*, so decried and confused, because no text is attached to the Salm-Dyck plate (1863). There is a great deal of confusion about the identification of this taxon, and illustrations on the internet show anything and everything. Reynolds thought it is a hybrid, because the inflorescence shown by Salm-Dyck is, according to him, not typical of any *Aloe* in South Africa. Still according to Reynolds, it would be a hybrid between *Aloe arborescens* and *A. mitriformis*, but this proposition is, in my opinion, highly improbable. *Aloe brevifolia* x *A. mitriformis* has also been proposed, but again, there is room for doubt.



Aloe nobilis, Salm-Dyck, Monogr. gen. Al. sect.24, 7, fasc.7, fig.9 (1863).

If we refer to the Salm-Dyck plate (right), my plant is undoubtedly the same, the color drawing of the flower as well as the habit of the plant and its inflorescence correspond in all respects. Moreover, a short description (in Latin) had been given fifty years before by Haworth (Syn. Pl. Succ. 78, 1812): simple bushy, leafy stem without branching, leaves erect, imbricated, broadly ovate-pointed,



Aloe nobilis in cultivation, perfectly matching the drawing of Salm-Dyck. Coll. JL

the lowest subdistant; numerous marginal spines. Although succinct, the description by Haworth “matches” fairly well with Salm-Dyck's drawing.

Anyhow, *Aloe nobilis* remains a mystery.



Aloe nobilis variegata in cultivation quite common on the market. Coll. JL

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