Bulbine
*Bulbine frutescens*

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**Try Bulbine in a Hot, Sunny Area**

Sometimes gardeners are introduced to unfamiliar plants in interesting ways. Often we run into them at nurseries or garden centers and long to try them for ourselves. More usually, though, we see them growing in friends’ and neighbors’ yards.

My introduction to Bulbine ‘Hallmark’ took place when I visited a gardening friend and neighbor. Often I walk by her house to see what is growing, and I am never disappointed, for she visits nurseries often and is not afraid to try new things. Through her experiments I have been introduced to many plants that I might have otherwise never known.

One of the most recent introductions from her garden is *Bulbine frutescens*. Sometimes called bulbinella and several other common names, it is a succulent, evergreen perennial groundcover. Fleshy green leaves similar to onion leaf blades arise from the base. Plants spread by rhizomes to create lumps. Small, six-petaled star-shaped orange or yellow flowers with fluffy yellow stamens bloom on stalks held two or three feet above the foliage in spring through summer. Fruit is a small, rounded capsule containing black seeds which are easily dispersed by the wind.

Bulbine prefers full sun but can tolerate some shade. Since it is native to the desert grasslands of South Africa, it requires well-drained soil and is tolerant of very poor, dry soil.

Maintenance is minimal. Deadhead to promote flowering. Be careful not to overwater, especially in fall and winter. Although it can withstand light frost, a mulch may offer winter protection. Freedom from pests and diseases and low nutrient needs make it an easy-to-care-for addition to the garden.

Propagation may be accomplished several ways. Bulbine self sows freely, so seedlings may appear around the mother plant. Transplant seedlings when they have four leaves and well-formed root systems. Starting new plants is as easy as simply breaking off plantlets and potting them up until they are large enough to be planted in the garden. Division of clumps in spring yields many new plants. One gardener from Texas reports
that she grows Bulbine in containers and divides it every 3-4 months, at which time it has filled her containers to capacity. The cultivar ‘Hallmark’ is self sterile, so seedlings will not be produced. It is smaller and tidier than the species, topping out at 8-10 inches and spreading to about two feet. I was lucky enough to find a start of this cultivar at Niceville Garden Center, so I know that it is available in our area.

No other cultivars were uncovered during my research, but both the cultivar and the species are easy-to-grow, water-wise, floriferous groundcovers which require a minimum of care. Some references refer to it as Bulbine fruticosa, and Bulbine caulescens is listed as a synonym, so it may be found under either of those names.

Fresh leaves provide a jelly-like substance much like the Aloe plant that can be used for treating burns, rashes, blisters, insect bites, and cracked areas of the skin. Succulent foliage pairs attractively with other coarser textured perennials. It may be used as an accent plant, in containers, or in rock and cactus gardens.

**At a Glance**

*Bulbine frutescens* syn. *Bulbine caulescens*

Say: BUL-bin-ee froo-TESS-enz  
Family: Liliaceae (Lily Family)  
Other names: Bulbinella, Snake flower, cat’s tail, burn jelly plant  
Origin: South Africa  
Zones: 8 (with protection) -11  
Light: Full sun preferred; tolerates shade during part of the day  
Water Use Zone: Low  
Size: 1-2 feet tall; 3-4 feet wide  
Soil: Well-drained, tolerant of poor, dry soil  
Salt tolerance: None evidenced in literature