

THE PREGNANT ONION

By Sue Haffner



Photo from Pernell Gerver

The “Pregnant Onion” is one of those taken---for---granted plants that you see in peoples’ collections, either potted or in the ground. I don’t recall having ever seen it in a nursery. It’s not an onion, although it looks sort of onion---y . The base of the plant resembles an onion—a green bulb with an outer papery skin. As the bulb matures, it will generate little bulblets under its outer skin. These bulblets, which are about a quarter of an inch in diameter, grow and break through the papery outer layers of skin and eventually will drop off. If the soil onto which they fall is adequate, they will grow their own roots and eventually sprout leaves. These leaves will become strap shaped, emerging from the top of the bulb and spreading out from the center. When the plant reaches maturity, which takes a year or two, it will send out its flower stalk from the center of the leaf bundle. The stalk can become quite long, perhaps twice the length of the leaves, and will display whitish flowers with broad green keels formed in a dense raceme.

This plant was known as *Ornithogalum caudatum* (or *O. Longibractatum*) for many years. Recently, however, the taxonomists have been working with the genus *Albuca* and have combined other genera within it. This plant is now officially *Albuca bracteata*. It is a South Africa native, found on shaded slopes and forest margins from the southeastern Cape to tropical East Africa.

As far as culture is concerned, the “Pregnant Onion” is almost foolproof. It is winter---hardy in our area, and only asks for protection from the direct summer sun. The constantly---generated bulblets can

be potted up in sandy soil, watered, fertilized and rarely fail. In fact, it's an ideal plant for children to grow.