

Exploring new avenues

by C Emily Dibb



Looking back, down the fifty-year avenue of my gardening life, I wonder how it is that I didn't think more of avenues when there was so much time to have planted one. A remark of Napoleon's germinated a seed of dissatisfaction within me, and I am now haunted by a sense of wasted opportunity. One hot day, while walking in the grounds of the estate where he was held prisoner on the island of Elba, Napoleon announced to one of his lieutenants, that he wanted to have an avenue of trees planted to shade the long road that led to the gatehouse. Dismayed, the lieutenant objected, pointing out that such an avenue would take a hundred years to attain maturity. 'In that case,' snapped Napoleon, 'there is no time to lose.'

Yes, we have planted avenues in South Africa. We have avenues of oaks or stone pines, and while no-one can dispute the splendour of the jacaranda, one longs to see the concept expressed in indigenous terms. The love we have for our indigenous trees is rather romantic. We love them for their very wildness, for their freedom from restraint, and it feels like a kind of betrayal to think in terms of using our wild trees in a contrived way. Yet there is much power and elegance in repetition, a device so cleverly employed by all the greatest landscape artists, from Le Notre to Russel Page.

In searching for suitable plants for an avenue one has to have in mind a vision of what is desired: a tunnel, a canyon, a gallery or simply a strongly defined route. In the latter case, *Strelizia regina*, or *Protea repens* would be spectacular since the sense of 'progression', so enriching to the ultimate concept of 'arrival', is equally inherent in an avenue of quite low-growing plants. The attraction of the overarching avenue is the cathedral-like solemnity of its enclosure. Nothing can approach the stateliness of a mature avenue of great trees, their very age and solidity has a calming effect, and the rhythm of those noble trunks one after another plays upon one's senses like great music. Even Nature has its own avenues that flank the great river thoroughfares of the world.

Some remarkable indigenous avenues

First, we shall visit Pointclair on the slopes of the Helderberg, looking out across the Cape Flats towards Table Mountain. We arrive on a fresh November morning when the south-easter wind is roaring in from the sea, driving a mass of white mist across the crown of the Hottentots Holland Mountains. The gate opens and we find ourselves at the entrance of a funnel of shimmering silver. The owner, Jan, has planted silver trees *Leucadendron argenteum* on either side of his drive in groups of three. This is his insurance policy against the silver tree's susceptibility to sudden death. The trees are five years old now. 'If any in the line die, it won't matter, I'll just cut them down, and new ones will come up. Okay, it won't be a regular avenue with one tree five metres from the next, but I actually like the variation in their ages and heights, it makes it more interesting.' The effect is bewitching. It is like moving through a fairy world of shimmering silver, where sun and wind combine to create a glittering world of trembling light and shadow. One arrives at the house in a state approaching euphoria.

Our second visit is to an old farmstead in the Overberg. This is a dairy farm, and across the open sweeps of pasture there marches, in military formation, a strange battalion of soldiers, gaunt figures with extravagant heads and curiously ragged attire. We are received into an avenue of *Aloe ferox* in full flower. They have an almost heraldic air, these veteran heroes, holding aloft their glowing candelabra. We proceed between the soldierly ranks, inspecting the troops. Many of them, I notice, are carrying gleaming war medals, in the form of sunbirds, and when Peter comes out onto the stoep to greet us, I can almost hear the brass bands and the crash of cymbals.

Our third avenue is in KwaZulu-Natal. We have arrived by light aircraft, at a little airstrip maintained by a small rural community near Sampsonsford in the heart of the sugar and pineapple belt. This avenue is the inspired work of old Mr.

Dodgson who has been responsible for the maintenance of the airfield since its inception. Taking for his theme the palm avenue so favoured by the sugar-barons of yesteryear, Dodgson went native, and made his out of indigenous palms. And not content with a single rank of trees on either side of the road, he doubled up, creating a colonnade backed by a lush mass of feathered fronds. Here is a man who understands the dramatic potential of the palm tree! The road from the airfield to the highway describes a gentle crescent. Both inner and outer sweeps of the sickle are dominated by a double row of *Hyphene* palms, whose great fan leaves almost meet overhead. The outlines of their leaves are repeated on the lawn beneath, in sharp cutout stencils of shade. There is an architectural quality to these lofty columns, an aura of unexpected grandeur. The crowns of the trees are alive with swifts coming and going, hunting and nesting.

Straight avenues, curved avenues, winding avenues, but who has ever heard of a corkscrew avenue? Well, in Mpumalanga a highly original palm avenue has been planted by Gert Rademeyer, a young avocado impresario. Gert found his aesthetic sense affronted by an irrigation tank on the top of a small kopje (rocky outcrop) in the middle of his land. Luckily Gert had planted several seedlings of the little wild date, *Phoenix reclinata*, that grew in his garden and had a forest of babies looking for good homes. It came to him that he could put them to good use to screen off the offending storage tank, and at the same time shade the hot and barren track up the kopje. Water was not a problem. He ran two coils of irrigation pipe on either side of the road, inserted drips at 2 m intervals and planted his palm babies. Within three years they had grown into a thicket of plumes, glittering and shimmering under the sun. In six years they shaded the road in arching splendour, and the storage tank disappeared behind a jungle of graceful palms. Birds throng to the kopje for shelter, food, nesting material and to drink at the puddles beneath the drips. As we drove slowly up the ever-tightening spiral of Gert's palm tunnel, it was as if we were inside an aviary, such twittering and gurgling of weavers, such scraping and fiddling of thrushes and chattering of sunbirds. 'It's a funny thing,' Gert said, 'I used to hate this place, now it's my favourite spot on the whole farm.'

Our fifth avenue is very much more modest in scale. Betty Fiddler, a retired teacher brought up in the veld, never lost her love of the wild trees, and when she bought a home of her own in Pretoria, she decided to surround herself with the old friends she had missed so much. Like many of us, she collected seeds of all the trees she loved most. For some reason, she had spectacularly good results with the seed of the small and delicate *Calpurnia aurea*, the African laburnum. Even after she had given dozens of seedlings away, Betty still had too many. A forest? A hedge? And then she remembered the laburnum walk at Kew. She planted the laburnums thickly on either side of the drive, and trained them strictly as they grew. (Teacher's instincts?) When they were well established, she set in place the framework of a light pergola and proceeded to school the young shoots so that they grew into a lattice tracery.

In summer, the pergola is deliciously cool, the pale green leaves of the calpurnias admitting a wavering watery light, almost as if one is walking on the floor of an aquarium. In winter, when the trees shed and one is glad of a little more warmth, the obedient branches create an attractive network

against the sky. It is September, bunches of intricately cupped flowers are close and the tender perfume pours out into the spring air. The whole pergola hums with bees, and twitches with white-eyes hard at work tweaking off the petals to get at the nectar. The driveway beneath was misted over with saffron confetti, and in another week, Betty told me, the ground would be a solid carpet of gold.

Our final visit is to the Marico where I hope to show you the most extraordinary avenue in the world. Our host is a young cattleman, Jacob. We are sitting on the stoep of a simple homestead, with a verandah running round three sides and a tin roof. The landscape is unrelievedly level thornveld and dry grass, red dust and pale blue sky, and the scratchy whistlings of the buffalo weavers form the background music. Jacob explains modestly how his scheme of monumental proportions came about. 'I'm one of those people who can't throw anything away,' he says. 'Somebody gave me this baobab pod. One day I broke it open and planted the seeds in a tin. Living all alone, I had no one else to look after, so I looked after the seeds. They came up in their dozens!'

Aboard his Land Cruiser, we went bucketing down a dusty track. Red cattle carrying a bloom of dust on their coats grazed comfortably on either side. Jacob stopped, and for a few moments we were enveloped in a red cloud. He led me into the veld. 'Here's one,' he said, indicating a small twig in the ground. We walk on a few yards, 'and the next.' The little trees are perhaps 2 m high, slender in relation to their height, but with the baobab's smooth grey bark with its hallmark waxy dribbles and swellings.

The baobab avenue runs from his homestead in a straight line towards the setting sun. 'I think of them as they will be in twenty, thirty, maybe fifty years from now, when they will be the biggest things between Pietersburg and the Botswana border. I may not be here, but,' he paused and looked piercingly into the veld, 'even if I am not, these baobabs will remember me.'

Thank you for joining me in this imaginary journey. Is it all fantasy, or is the truth just under the surface? The seeds are here, the land is here, all we need do is put the two together, and the dream will become reality.

