

My fynbos garden at the tip of Africa

by Meg Cowper-Lewis



ABOVE LEFT: Southernmost reflected in the tidal pool on a rare calm morning. Southernmost was the first house to be built in Agulhas, in 1929, and is still the southernmost private home in Africa. Photo: Meg Cowper-Lewis.

ABOVE RIGHT: A view of the garden before the start of the fynbos project. Photo: Meg Cowper-Lewis.

On 13 April 1996 my whole life changed. This was the day of my exodus from lush, subtropical Durban to salt-laden and windblown Cape Agulhas at the tip of Africa. After seventeen years in Durban I moved to Southernmost, which has been our beloved family home for close on half a century.

The first house to be built in Agulhas, Southernmost is still the southernmost private home in Africa. It was built in 1929 by Michiel van Breda of the well-known Overberg farm 'Zoetendals Vallei'. Having weathered winter storms and screaming southeasters, it was now desperately in need of love and care. The expansive lawn had been maintained by house-minder Jerry Buirski for many years, but the rest of the garden was virtually non-existent: a few lonely aloes, some hardy grey bushes and groundcover and, of course, the daisies in springtime.

For the first couple of years I concentrated on making the old house habitable again, and setting up a B&B. After the second year I decided to close the B&B after each busy summer season, and so, in the winter of 1998 and now deliriously in love with our local fynbos, I started to convert large parts of our existing lawn of buffalo grass *Stenotaphrum secundatum* into an indigenous and waterwise fynbos coastal garden.

I would estimate my success rate during the first year as not much more than 25 percent, but with invaluable advice from our local amateur fynbos guru, the late Lettie Myburgh, I have now managed to increase this success rate to around a whopping 80 percent. I learnt very quickly, through bitter trial and error, that transplanting fynbos is not for sissies. One summer I watched a bulldozer trashing some huge, full-grown thatching restios *Thamnochortus insignis* and tried to

ABOVE: A welcome sign for travellers to the windswept tip of Africa. A little cluster of aloes, strandbietou *Chrysanthemoides incana* and the milkwood-sheltering manatoka in the background. Photo: Meg Cowper-Lewis.

save as many of them as I could pack into my small car. The dry, sandy soil had fallen off their roots, and even with infinite care, none survived. Fynbos for transplanting must be tiny - not more than 20 cm high, and since the soil needs to be damp enough not to fall off the roots, transplanting can really only happen after the first winter rains. With each tiny plant I try to bring along a five-litre bucket of its own soil to minimize the shock of re-location. I then mulch with decomposed organic kitchen waste and fynbos leaf mould. These new plants will need water for the first crucial two or three years of their lives, and thereafter, they're on their own through the hot, dry summer.

My baby plants come mainly from our famous limestone ridge. Situated on high ground above the town, much of this astoundingly beautiful fynbos is endemic. Heavily threatened by rampant development over the past fifteen years, this botanic gem is fast disappearing. I scour the road verges in the new townships, rescuing small fynbos plants before they become a fatal statistic to the herbicide that the Municipality sprays on the road verges to 'keep them clean'. I also watch out for vacant plots on which development is to begin, and try to beat the earth-moving machines to them before the entire plot's vegetation is lost. I have also propagated hundreds of aloes, vygies and indigenous shrubs and groundcover from Southermost's own garden.

Ultimately though, it is the fynbos that springs up spontaneously that will always be the strongest and the most resilient. Bruinsalie or brown sage *Salvia africana-lutea*, the sea guarri *Euclea racemosa* and various varieties of *Rhus*, have all appeared as if by magic.

Our house, right on the oceanfront, battles bravely through the Cape winter storms, whilst in summer, we bear the brunt of screaming southeasters, which slash at the vegetation with salt-laden, whip-like gusts. Just a few days of this, and even hardy fynbos starts to take the strain. New tips shrivel and blacken, with only a few standing up to this onslaught. Fortunately, species such as *Metalasia*, wild rosemary *Eriocephalus africanus* var. *paniculatus* and *E. racemosus*, the faithful bietou *Chrysanthemoides monilifera* and the Australasian but non-invasive coprosma, its fruits relished by Cape bulbuls, provide windbreaks for smaller and more sensitive plants.

Southermost's enclosed courtyard affords some respite from the southeaster for those plants unable to stand the wind, but even here the salty air penetrates when the wind is strong. I have tried in vain to grow my own veggies and herbs. Sadly though, even in the most sheltered of places they are still severely growth-impeded, some plants eventually giving up the battle for survival.

Over the years one learns what works and what does not. I have tried proteas, leucospermums and ericas with very poor results. Other species, such as the limestone conebush *Leucadendron meridianum*, battle on although one can see they're not very comfortable down on the sandy flats and away from the limestone ridge or the mountain slopes. Restios and grasses will always be an essential part of any fynbos garden and the local thatching reed *Thamnochortus insignis*, the closely-related *T. fraternus* and *Ischyrolepis eleocharis* all create constant movement in the garden.

Our much-loved and protected milkwoods *Sideroxylon inerme* are not hardy enough to ever become proper trees growing close to this coastline. They end up instead as thickets, which serve a useful purpose by creating protection and nesting sites for small mammals and spurfowls. Sadly, my three baby milkwoods among the garden fynbos will never grow into trees. Conversely, the old milkwoods growing among alien manatokas (*Myoporum*) and sheltered by the garage from the southeaster simply thrive. An on-going ethical quandary arises: does one remove the aliens, or allow them to stay and protect the milkwoods?

Cotyledon orbiculata loves the garden, but its growth is always stunted by the small Cape grysbokkies coming along for breakfast. Those that survive the bokkies and eventually flower are great favourites with the lesser double-colored and malachite sunbirds.

As the garden expands, so do the number and variety of its faunal visitors. 'Bokkie' has been seen emerging from her bed amongst the fynbos, and porcupines, hares, tortoises, mongooses, mole snakes, and the odd puff adder all visit from time to time. Encouraging is a recent huge increase in the bee population. A proliferation of birds includes Cape bulbuls, bokmakeries, crowned plovers, rock martins, spurfowls, and even the shy greywing francolin and the occasional hoopoe, whilst at night we hear the plaintive



TOP: Gardening gets underway in Southermost, with the historic Cape Agulhas Lighthouse providing a picturesque background.

ABOVE: A view across the garden to the southernmost point of Africa. Southermost is right on the border of the Agulhas National Park. To the left you can see the result of the 2005 plantings, and to the right, the beds prepared for the 2006 winter plantings.

BELOW: Southermost in the spring. Along the broad, grassed Agulhas waterfront, the yellow daisy *Cineraria geifolia*, the gousblom *Arctotis acaulis* and the white spreading daisy *Dimorphotheca fruticosa* burst into bloom.

Photos: Meg Cowper-Lewis.

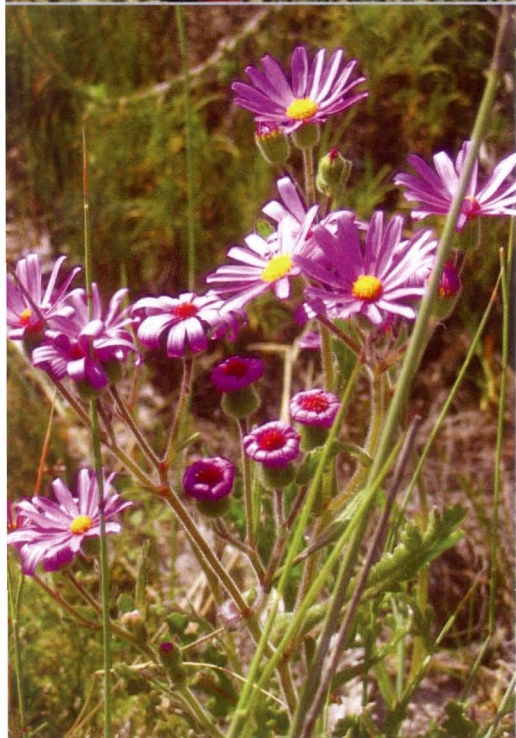




ABOVE: The highlight of winter is Southermost's wonderful display of aloes. Here the striking blooms of *Aloe arborescens* seem colour-coded to the historic Cape Agulhas Lighthouse. Photo: Meg Cowper-Lewis.

BELOW: Excitement erupts in February and March when the indigenous April fool or skeerkwassies *Haemanthus coccineus* burst into bloom. Coming straight out of dry, poor soil, the blooms of these bulbs are spectacular and fascinating. Photo: Meg Cowper-Lewis.

BOTTOM: Spring brings the daisies, and on the limestone ridge, the dune daisy or wild cineraria *Senecio elegans* proliferates.



cries of the spotted dikkop roaming around the property. Cisticolas nest in a *Leucadendron* while the tiny prinias love a swim in the sprinkler. I presume that this increase in wild things is also partly due to Southermost's shared border with the Agulhas National Park, established eight years ago.

Our giant dune moles, adored by conservationists but a nightmare for gardeners, often appear after the first winter rains. Well-established plants can simply disappear under a molehill the size of a small koppie (hill), or have their entire root system chomped off! For someone who is both conservationist and gardener, this clash of interests creates yet another ethical conflict.

Spring

Spring brings the daisies! Down on the broad, grassed Agulhas waterfront, the yellow daisy *Cineraria geifolia*, the gousblom *Arctotis acaulis* and the white spreading daisy *Dimorphotheca fruticosa* (formerly *Osteospermum fruticosum*) burst into bloom, whilst towards the Historic Point, *Gazania pectinata*, *Osteospermum subulatum* and everlastings *Helichrysum retortum* spring up everywhere. On the limestone ridge, the dune daisy *Senecio elegans* creates an undulating purple carpet, and the hardy *Zygophyllum morgsana*, which never fails to rejuvenate from bushes

that just weeks before had looked completely dead, and the smaller *Z. flexuosum* with its dainty yellow flowers, flourish.

We also see the lovely yellow blooms of the medicinal geelkatstert (yellow cat's tail) *Bulbine lagopus*, and the vygies or mesembs that include the huge purple-flowered suurvy or sour fig *Carpobrotus acinaciformis* and *Lampranthus amabilis* with their striking orange and magenta flowers, thrive into the summer months.

Spring brings out the best of our flowering limestone fynbos, and a hike along the ridge is a constant reminder of our unique Floral Kingdom and its astonishingly dense biodiversity.

Summer

Our summers are warm, dry and, tempered by the prevailing winds, they escape the intense heat of inland areas. The sun is hot and almost overhead, the soil dry and oily from the harsh southeast winds ... and all I can do now is try to maintain the new plantings through their first crucial summers.

Excitement erupts in February and March when the indigenous April fools or skeerkwassies *Haemanthus coccineus* and *H. sanguineus* burst into bloom. Coming straight out of dry, poor soil, the blooms of these bulbs are spectacular, and fascinate not only local residents but world travellers to the southern tip of Africa as well.

Geraniums and pelargoniums too, especially *Pelargonium capitatum* with its sweet-scented leaves, and *P. cucullatum*, attractive with its veined pinky-red flowers, love the summer months.

Autumn

Although autumn in Cape Agulhas does not quite fit Keats's 'season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,' it certainly has a charm of its own, and is truly a time of calm and rejuvenation. After the southeaster abates, and before the winter storms and frantic fynbos-planting begins, the summer crowds leave, the days turn warm and gentle, the sun is lower in the north, and the nights are crisp, clear and star-filled. The autumn sky is cornflower and cobalt, the sea a streaky blend of Prussian, aquamarine, turquoise, viridian. After the first autumn showers, the stretch of grass along the waterfront turns from ochre to subtle shades of green. This is Cape Agulhas at its very best, with residents and fynbos relaxing into these brief, but mellow days.

With the B&B closed for winter, I now turn to my many hobbies and interests: the patchwork quilt for a grandchild, watercolour or charcoal portraiture classes, photography, writing or environmental work. Or maybe a short trip over the Swartberg into the Great Karoo. And then, together with the winter rains, work starts again and planting begins in earnest.

Winter

The highlight of winter is Southermost's wonderful display of aloes: three hundred blooms this year. The Southern Overberg Fynbos includes only two aloes, *Aloe arborescens* and the tiny, compact, vulnerable *A. brevifolia*, endemic to the Western Cape. The rest of the aloes in the garden come from other parts of the country. They are extremely ornamental, non-invasive, loved by the sunbirds, and can provide a bit of wind shelter for struggling baby fynbos. Very striking is *A. ferox* with its fat, pink-tipped leaves.

Arums *Zantedeschia aethiopica* spring up from nowhere in their hundreds, and the wonderfully hardy blombosse - the common blombos *Metasias muricata*, the limestone blombos *M. calcicola* and *M. pungens* - all transplant successfully, grow easily, act as windbreaks for smaller plants and exude exotic smells of honey and herbs as you pass by.

Bulbs like *Watsonia coccinea* and *W. meriana*, *Lachenalia bulbifera* and *L. rubida* and *Babiana montana* (bobbejaantjies), are all to be seen during winter and spring.

It would be remiss of me not to mention my sole garden helper, Mr Nico Moses from Struisbaai. For the last eight years, between his days of going to sea, Nico has dug up literally thousands of sods of grass for me. Always cheerful, ever willing to do the most

"I scour the road verges in the new townships, rescuing small fynbos plants before they become a fatal statistic to the herbicide that the Municipality sprays on the road verges..."



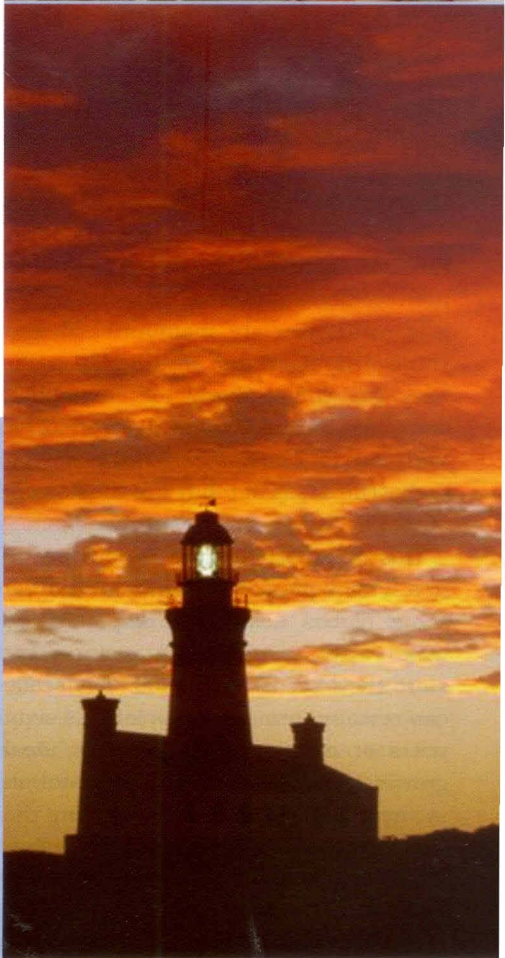
LEFT: Meg Cowper-Lewis and garden helper Nico Moses in the garden of Southermost. Photo: Hilary Marshall

BELOW: A pelargonium pot plant shelters from the wind on the patio at Southermost. Photo: Meg Cowper-Lewis.

BOTTOM: The Cape Agulhas Lighthouse lights up as the summer sun sets. Photo: Meg Cowper-Lewis.

backbreaking of jobs to enhance 'our' garden, Nico has been an essential part of the project, without whom I could never have achieved the success of my first decade of this work in progress.

Our tiny Cape Floristic Region, unique and so rich in biodiversity, is under serious threat from unsustainable development, loss of habitat, agriculture and other human impacts and has already been reduced by half. The Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew regard it so highly amidst the vast botanical wealth of the planet that they have consigned to us an entire glasshouse. During my visits to those great gardens at Kew, I have stood in that Victorian glasshouse bursting with national pride, with tears rolling down my cheeks. Pleased and proud too with my efforts to conserve some of it in my little garden at the tip of Africa. 🌿



The Author

Meg Cowper-Lewis has served as an Honorary Nature Conservation Officer for CapeNature since 1999, and for two years as a SANParks Honorary Ranger (Fynbos Parks). She is an active member of Greenpeace and a longstanding member of WESSA and BotSoc. In 1999 Meg founded the Suidpunt Environmental Alliance (SEA) of which she is the director, and which now has 150 signatories pledging support. Meg has been an active member of Mensa South Africa for 27 years, and was awarded Honorary Life Membership in 1990.

Meg can be contacted at tel +27 (0)28 435 6565; fax +27 (0)28 435 6544; email meg@isat.co.za and website www.southermost.co.za.

Further reading

Cowling, R.M. and Richardson, D. 1995. *Fynbos: South Africa's unique floral kingdom*. Fernwood Press, Cape Town.

Maytham Kidd, M. 1983. *Cape Peninsula*. Wild Flower Guide 3. Botanical Society of SA, Cape Town.

Mustart, P., Cowling, R., Albertyn, J., and Paterson-Jones, C. 1997. *Southern Overberg Wild Flower Guide 8*. Botanical Society of SA, Cape Town.