Indigenous Plants for Cape Coastal Gardens

Part 3

Creating the final product

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This is the third and final article in a series designed to assist the home-owner in the development of an indigenous garden in the harsh conditions along the coast. Here I elaborate briefly on some aspects of site preparation and how to combine various indigenous plants into an attractively landscaped coastal garden.

Landscaping invariably conjures up images of major earthworks. Remember, we are trying to reintroduce indigenous plants into an environment to which they are adapted. So try not to interfere too much with the natural soils and topography; use these to your advantage.

Each of us has innovative ideas. With some simple basics I believe the average indigenous garden enthusiast can exercise that creativity and develop a garden which will not only be attractive, but will also give much pleasure and satisfaction.

New homes

Once you have settled on your site, and you have determined your soil type (see Low 1989a) try to avoid disturbing the soils surrounding your house-to-be. No easy task, I know, but your chances of success are greatly increased if indigenous plants are introduced into a natural soil which has had minimal disturbance. Builders should be given strict instructions as to where they should conduct their activities. Above all, limit cement and concrete mixing to one small area only. There is nothing worse than having mounds of diseased concrete and cement heaped on your plot.

Builder's rubble is virtually impossible to clear, and is an eyesore. You will spend many years removing unwanted stones and small pieces of rubble as the wind exposes them with time. It might be a good idea to include in the building contract, a clause to ensure that all builder's rubble is removed from the site.

Back to landscaping. I wish to offer some basic tips on how to develop your plot. It is most important that the soil is subject to minimal disturbance.

However, if your plot is on a slope, a few major choices have to be made. One important consideration is a lawn; this is critical if one has children (ball games, etc.), but it also requires time in maintenance. Create a flat area immediately abutting your dwelling or dwelling-to-be. I suggest you arrange with your builder to have the earthworks completed before or during the building of the house. Heavy earthworks after you have moved in are not conducive to maintaining peace and stability in the average household! Also, don't put yourself through the mental and physical anguish of manual shifting of soil using wheelbarrows.

Changing the soil

Most coastal soils are underlain by calcareous sand, yet a majority of home-owners probably prefer acid-loving fynbos plants (e.g. Protea cynaroides (giant protea), Leucospermum cuneiforme (pincushion), Erica versicolor, etc.) which are not suited to these soils.

One option is to import acid-soil (e.g. sandstone or granite), but this is a costly business. One particular site which I landscaped, was on the slope of an old dune, and required the import of large amounts of fill for
Example of a landscape plan for a coastal garden.

 levelling the plot. The homeowner desperately wanted a “protea garden”. We arrived at a delightful solution: calcareous sand from one corner of the plot was used as fill in another corner. This left a substantial hole, which we then filled with acid sand transported from some distance away. An additional cost, yes, but an acceptable compromise. Not only was the client’s plot partially landscaped using his own soil, but a protea garden with acid-loving plants could then be developed.

**Position of your house**

If your plot is located within half a kilometre of the coast, the chances are that you will experience the vagaries of southerly winds in the summer, and the northerlies in winter (winter rainfall region). Both can be extremely devastating to plant growth, no matter how hardy. It is therefore advisable that you plan your garden-to-be carefully in relation to the position of your house. Clearly the house can be used as a shelter for part of the garden, and it is therefore

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*Graphics: Anne Weensby.*
essential that you glean some knowledge of local climatic conditions, preferably from inhabitants who have lived in the area for some length of time. Where possible, design your house to protect your future garden.

**Form and function**

At the coast, emphasis must be placed on function over appeal. Fortunately, there is a wide range of species available which can assist you in producing a garden which embodies both characteristics. I list several major groups of plants below which, when used in combination, can produce a desirable and attractive garden:

(i) an outer border of wind-resistant shrubs which are relatively quick-growing, with a spreading rather than vertical form. Plant close together. It may be wise to erect a temporary shade cloth fence which offers the necessary protection from wind in the earlier stages of the garden. A simple construction of green shade cloth (50 to 70% is adequate — note that wind must be allowed to pass through) and tanalith-treated timber poles. Remove the structure after the outer shrubs provide adequate protection (two to three years’ growth, depending on species and prevailing conditions).

(ii) an inner border of less-hardy shrubs, herbs, reeds and creepers. Selection of species should ensure that these are not as tall as the previous group, and heights should decrease from the border inwards.

(iii) trees. These rarely occur at the Cape coast and then only in sheltered spots. Unless you have a suitable corner which is assured good and all-year-round protection from wind and salt spray, don’t bother with trees. There are a number of hardy shrub species which will grow tall enough (e.g. Brachylaena discolor), and there are also many aesthetically pleasing structures which can replace the function of trees.

(iv) groundcovers. These are excellent for areas close to the house, such as along a driveway or bordering a shrubbery. A great range of leaf shapes and colours is available, while many flower prolifically. As their name suggests, they prevent the loss of soil to strong winds, and are excellent at retaining soil moisture. In the early stages of garden development, it is sometimes advisable to peg down groundcovers and smaller shrubs with coarse nylon netting. Together with mulching, this usually prevents loss of soil and plants, and provides that initial boost for rapid plant growth.

(v) annuals and geophytes. (These include plants which complete their life-cycle within a year, usually from winter through to late spring) and geophytes (plants which have underground storage organs such as bulbs, and which produce leaves and flowers only at certain times of the year). These can be used throughout your garden or in a “surprise corner”. Their wise use can produce pleasant and attractive surprises in various parts of your garden. In fact, careful planning can ensure that your garden boasts a range of annuals and geophytes which flower virtually throughout the year!

**The coastal garden**

At this stage let’s put everything into context. The accompanying diagram gives an example of a coastal garden. Brief suggestions for planting were provided in Low (1989a). (A list of appropriate species and their chief characteristics was provided in the previous issue of Veld & Flora 75(4).)

I’ll let your imagination and spirit of creativity do the rest.

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I thank Rod Saunders for commenting on the article. Garden featured is the Coopers’ of Vermont.

**REFERENCES**


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