

RHODES' COTTAGE

New hope for an old garden.

by C. Emily Dibb,
Muizenberg

Many of us know of Rhodes Cottage in Muizenberg, the little house with a thatched roof where Cecil John Rhodes breathed his last. The cottage faces out to sea, and between it and the waves there is a narrow strip of wasteland running parallel to the railway. This had become a rubbish tip, the only growing things a castor-oil plant and a crop of devil thorns. Living next door to Rhodes Cottage, I grieved over this eyesore. Finally, I took the bull by the horns and asked the Municipality if they would allow me to cultivate it. To my delight they not only agreed, but offered to help in the form of a water-point, a start-up load of compost and an assortment of indigenous plants.

The project got underway, appropriately, on Arbor Day - 1 September 1999. In those first months, it was my practice to put on my shabbiest gardening rags and start work there as soon as it was light enough. And it was on one windy morning while I was engaged in scratching at the devil thorns with my hoe that I was approached by a gentleman in collar and tie, who leaned over the guard rails next to the road and indicated that he wished to speak. For the next few minutes we screamed at one another against the thunder of the sea and the roar of the early morning traffic.

"Do you like doing this sort of thing?" he shouted.
"Love it," I screamed back.
"You wouldn't like to do Rhodes Cottage as well, would you?"
"Are you serious? Yes please!"
I'd looked at that garden day after day and longed to get at it.



Rhodes Cottage, Muizenberg. Illustration by C. Emily Dibb.

There was an enforced delay however, while the routine running of the Rhodes Cottage Museum was transferred from the Municipality to the new caretakers, the Muizenberg Historical and Conservation Society. This period gave me time to prowl and assess, and to get the feeling of the place. It became clear that I was looking, in effect, at two gardens - one that consisted of the immediate environs of the cottage and the other a tangle of fynbos and aliens that covered the mountainside behind. Together they formed a steep rectangle, something over an acre in extent.

It seemed appropriate to try to recover the mood of the domestic garden, as it had been in CJR's time, but this was easier said than done. The only survivor from those days was a valiant old hydrangea, which was holding its own against an army of coprosma, oleander and myoporum. At various periods since Rhodes' death, someone must have said, 'Shouldn't we plant a plumbago?' as there were unruly colonies of plumbago everywhere, suckering into the lawn and blurring the outlines of the once orderly Victorian garden. There were also several hibiscus plants, a

bougainvillea, agapanthus and two excellent streptocarpus - all bound together in an ungovernable thicket by a rampant growth of ivy, *Vinca major* and Kikuyu grass.

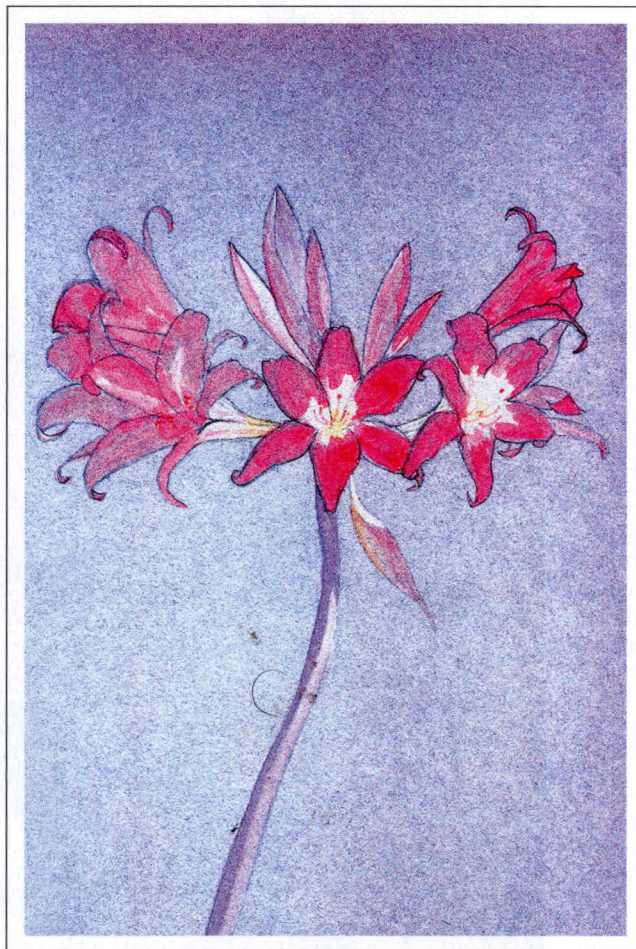
A major dilemma now presented itself. Should I follow tradition and replicate the conventional Victorian cottage garden with lavender, roses and honeysuckle? Or should I risk being burned at the stake and replace the existing horticultural catastrophe with indigenous plants? If I tried to strike a compromise between the two, I should probably be hissed as a heretic by the fynbos purists, and denounced as a barbarian by the Chairlady of every Garden Club from here to the Zambezi. There were other considerations too, of a more mundane character. Having grappled with local gardening conditions for eight years, I was painfully aware of the severe limitations of the site. More dreams had crashed in flames in my own garden that I care to recall. There are four major difficulties here.

Firstly, and above all, the wind. It governs our lives and dominates every living thing. There is no hiding place, no such thing as a sheltered corner. Secondly, the proximity to the sea. Gales are loaded with salt, which gives the wind the force of a blowtorch. Added to this, the high humidity at night supplies a happy breeding ground for every fungal disease known to humans, and probably several that are not! Thirdly, the light. On this side of the mountain we receive full sunlight for the first half of the day, and total shadow for the second half. There are very few conventional garden plants that will tolerate these extremes. And fourthly, the soil: wretched, poor, hydrophobic and full of loose rocks. The original title deeds of our property dismiss it accurately as 'inferior grazing, steep and covered with stones.'

Yes, I could plant up honeysuckle and old-world roses but I knew from bitter experience that it would be a waste of effort. I knew that many prate as did really well in these conditions, and I could never put out of my mind the blaze of glory created every March by the scores of

Amaryllis belladonna that come up generously, all of their own accord. I had to find a horticultural compromise. In the end I resorted to invoking the spirit of CJR himself. Discovering the principles that governed his personal tastes has been a fascinating exercise, and translating these into the language of leaves and flowers is proving to be one of the most captivating projects I have undertaken in fifty years of gardening.

While searching for historical



Amaryllis belladonna flowers come up in the garden each March. Illustration by C. Emily Dibb.

parallels, I came across a number of plant and seed catalogues from the Victorian era. These proved interesting insights into the themes that dominated the period and influenced the Victorian's aesthetic values. They were obsessed with order. Geometric shapes, tidy edges and straight paths were essential. Plants were required to submit to man's will, as exemplified in archways and topiaries and neatly clipped hedges. They also drew comfort and inspiration from the notion of Empire. In horticultural terms this meant that one's garden had to include specimens that spoke of far-flung places. Exotic shapes and forms were highly esteemed.

This was the golden age of the Potted Palm, the aspidistra and the clump of ornamental grass. South African plants were greatly sought after throughout the British Empire and large numbers of them are featured in the promotional horticultural literature of the day, particularly ericas, restios and bulbs.

With regard then to creating a period garden, I felt I had ample scope to extend myself on indigenous plants. But I also had to give consideration to CJR himself,

and attempt to reflect the man and his own tastes and preferences. Although Rhodes was very much a man of his time, he was also a man outside of time, a man who drew inspiration from the Romans, the Chinese, the Dutch and the Indians. Wealth bought him fame, but he tended always towards simplicity. He was noted for his straightforward manner of speech and for his preference for informality in dress and manner. In his latter years, when free from public office, he habitually wore white trousers and a blue shirt. One wonders whether the white and blue had associations for him - Oxford perhaps? Or liberty (it being a curious detail of colour psychology that freedom-loving peoples choose blue and white for their national flags).

He adored the veld, and regularly sought solace in wild places. Solitude and natural splendour were profoundly important to him, as we know from his choice of burial site. He

loved to be out in the open and frequently shocked his contemporaries by insisting that his houses be filled with fresh air and sunshine.

Here then were themes enough to weave into a garden. Clearing began on 1 December 1999, and within a short time it was possible to re-establish the formal framework of the original layout. All the components were there, the straight paths, the rectangular beds, the stone-edged terraces, all pleasing in their symmetry and simplicity. Coprosmas, oleanders and myoporum were eliminated without mercy, hibiscus moved to the peripheries and two hideous cement planters filled with hen-and-

chicks were banished outright. The surviving hydrangeas were used as a source of slips to recreate the mass of flower in front of the stoep, which the oldest pictures show us. Two beds flanking the Coach House have been filled with lavender and period roses selected for their ability to prosper in poor soil and semi-shade. The main framework of the garden is now picked out in agapanthus, while dwarf agapanthus, both white and blue, line the steps that approach the front door. All these beds are given additional colour with various annuals - pride of place going to *Senecio elegans*, *Dimorphotheca* and sea statice.

Once we had passed the Autumn Equinox, I bought in some 300 assorted Proteaceae, ericas and restios and kept them for three weeks in a holding bed to allow them to adjust to the air and the light. Most of the ericas (*Erica baueri*, *E. caffra*, *E. glandulosa*, *E. perspicua*, *E. quadrangularis* and *E. regia*) are stationed round the upper terrace, and although the plants are still too small to attract notice, they are pushing out clusters of buds and seem keen to prove themselves immediately. Four wide stone steps lead from the lower terrace to the upper terrace. These are clasped by two square box-beds in which I have planted *Leucospermum* 'High Gold' each in a nest of annuals. The foot of the terrace wall is an important spot, being instantly visible from the gate. It also faces into the teeth of the salt-laden wind, so here I have planted a bank of *Mimetes cucullatus*. Until they attain their proper height, I shall need to support them with colourful annuals.

The remainder of the 300 plants is destined for the mountainside behind the cottage. The drip lines are all in place, and already most of the little proteas are firming up and looking confident. It remains now to flesh out these plantings with bulbous things, indigenous annuals and appropriate sub-shrubs. It all looks raw and tenuous as we enter the first week of winter rain and it is probably too soon to say whether this project will succeed, but gardeners as a breed are an optimistic lot and all the signs are hopeful. I am continually put in mind of CJR's last words, 'So little done, so much still to do,' but I console myself with the knowledge that at least we have made a start.



Leucospermum tottum and *Euryops virgineus* thrive in these maritime conditions. Rhodes Cottage in the background. Photo: D.N. Dibb.



The bright pink blooms of *Pelargonium cucullatum* and restio spikes intermingle with roses, lavender and sea statice at Rhodes Cottage. Photo: D.N. Dibb.

DO YOU HAVE A WILD GARDEN?

The Editorial Committee of *Veld & Flora* will be voting for the best article by an amateur botanist appearing in the magazine during 2000. The winner will be announced in the March issue of 2001, and the prize will be a year's membership of the Botanical Society. The competition runs on a yearly basis. The article can be about your wild garden, a trip to view wildflowers, what your nearest urban open space is doing to preserve indigenous plants or anything to do with southern Africa's indigenous flora. Please include original drawings or photographs (slides or prints) as these really make a difference when it comes to voting! The winner of the 1999 best article by an amateur botanist was Thys de Villiers for his article 'A rare double for the erica hunters' on p. 27 of the March 1999 issue of *Veld & Flora*. Thys wins a year's membership of the Botanical Society. Details for submission can be found on the contents page of any issue, and guidelines for authors on page 5 of the March 1999 issue. For more information contact the Botanical Society, Private bag X10, Newlands, 7725. Tel (021) 797 2090, fax (021) 797 2376 or e-mail <botsocsa@gem.co.za>.