'There is a garden in her face, where roses and white lilies grow'  

Thomas Campion

We looked at our newly built house on bare ground with a somewhat sinking feeling. Out from the UK only a short while ago, with no gardening skills, we set about creating a garden in which our family could play. Gardening meant roses, iris and magnolias, silver birches and weeping willow trees: typically European in concept and execution, and we duly planted them all. Amongst all the well known plants, was a Buddleja salviifolia, but that went pretty soon because of the enormous amount of caterpillars it supported! Nothing thrived; borers in the willows and roses, termites in the birches and morels in the bulbs! A re-think was necessary!

Gardening books became part of our lifestyle, and the first books on South African plants for the uninitiated layman began to appear. Gradually, it dawned on us that in fact, South African plants for a South African setting might be the better option, and the hunt was on for alternatives to European plants. All well and good, but the nurserymen had no idea what constituted ‘indigenous’ plants. (a Deinbollia exotic was sold to us as a Bolusanthus speciosus. We had our suspicions, but no way to prove it) and it took time and effort to acquire the beginnings of an indigenous garden.

The first tree planted was a Virgilia arboideae, guaranteed to be fast growing even though only lasting about fifteen years. Four years later it hadn’t even put on one leaf, let alone grown or flowered! Out! Maybe we would do better with what we had. The neighbourhood was springing up around us and the newly planted gardens, full of crotons, lilies, Australian flame trees and palms, looked as though they had been there for years, whilst ours was still a wasteland!

We persevered, collecting where we could and learning as we went along, even though no one could tell us much about ‘indigenous’, where they came from and how to grow them! We eventually ended up with a reasonable collection of shrubs or under-storey plantings as they were unavailable.

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Birds have always been high on our list of interests and eventually we counted over 120 species through our garden in the 27 years we lived there, but in all those years, we never had any species nesting. Feeding yes, but always coming from the next door gardens where all the exotics were!

'A garden is a lovesome thing, God wot'  

Thomas E. Brown

In 1991 we purchased a plot of land in Hilton, part of an old garden with plane and camphor trees, cypress, holly, privet and liquidamber. We set about removing all of these in order to create a totally indigenous garden full of indigenous fruit and flowers to encourage the birds.

While the house was being designed and built, we began on our plantings. The idea was to have water in one corner flowing into grassland areas and on into a forest area, the latter to screen out the neighbours. ‘Absolutely everything will grow in Hilton’, we were told. Friends were most kind, offering all sorts of cuttings from all over the world! All very kindly rejected. We began with an Acacia sieberiana grown with loving care from seed collected on the last day of our youngest daughter’s school life when she threw her hat into a beautiful specimen just outside the school grounds! That went with frost during the first winter. More plantings were undertaken, most of which died: an Encephalartos natalensis to the mist and rain and a Jasminum multipartitum also to frost.

We moved in to our new home in the summer of 1995 and one of our first purchases was a thermometer, which told us that the temperature dropped to -10 °C on some nights during winter. A visit to a tree enthusiast in Zululand, showed us the benefits of pioneer planting and our well-chewed friend Buddleja was recommended. Amongst them we planted a variety of trees including Ptaeroxylon obliquum, Apodytes dimidiata, Calpurnia aurea, Kiggelaria africana, Dombeya rotundifolia, Podocarpus and Celtis africana.

During our first two winters here, we lost most of our trees through frost, and even the yellowwoods were knocked back to half their size. The buddleja flourished and the first spring was a mass of scented flowers which brought the insects and after them, the birds. We re-planted the second and third spring and nurtured the trees which had survived but were now multi-stemmed instead of straight and true and learnt something of the conditions in which we were living.

A soil sample sent for testing came back with full instructions on how to grow peas and beans, cabbages and cauliflower. We believe that we have depleted soil in our garden, as some of our trees are inclined to fall over and ‘bury their heads in the sand!’ The acacias and schotias are particularly prone to this. Die-back in the Celtis and Kiggelaria is also a problem which we still have to answer. This occurs in summer so it can’t be the frost.

Growing trees in Hilton.
A bit of research told us that Hilton was originally a grassland area and the reason for the exotic trees such as pine and plane, cypress and privet, and the pretty English gardens here were as a result of nothing much else managing to survive. But Acacia sieberiana grew all the way up the old road to Hilton and as the coastal Albizia would never survive here, we tried again, purchasing two large specimens, planted as feature trees, wrapping them up warmly in newspaper during the second winter. They survived well. The Buddleja was removed, having done its job well, leaving one specimen only for the scent and insects - we were learning! Joining the Botanical Society at this time and meeting so many enthusiasts helped greatly.

Under-storey shrubs are now becoming more available. Plantings, include *Rhamnus prinoides* (self seeding around the garden and adored by the black-eyed bulbuls), *Halleria lucida* (frost bitten but not dead) *Hypericum* (thriving), *Myrsine africana, Salvia africana-lutea* (a wonderful show), *Tecoma capensis* (frosted badly until protected well) and many more. These plants have overtaken the trees in size, so the aesthetics of the landscaping looks a bit odd. We are now planting in threes for sex and fruiting purposes and more of the *Rhizoma* and *Combretum* species as these survive the frost better.

Learning all the time, we have allowed the natural weeds to take over in some places, including *Helichrysum* and *Crocosmia*, which give us magnificent spring and autumn shows. Grasses have become a feature too and sometimes grow too well - the neighbours believe we never weed our garden at all! Tender plants such as *Ochna serrulata* and *Burchellia bubalina, Codidia rudis, Cassinopsis illicifoila, Xylotheca kraussiana* and *Acokanthera oppositifolia* are potted up and protected by being close to the house. A collection of hybrid *Streptocarpus* is kept on the verandah and flowers for much of the year.

With no storm water drainage in Hilton, and 100 mm of rain in a short period in December 1999 causing ankle deep water over the whole lawn, we now plan a re-think of our wetland plantings around the pond, to slow the pace of run-off. The soil removed from this pond will give us an opportunity to build up a grassland bank with locally indigenous species and wetland plantings around the pond, to slow the pace of run-off.

We now have more than sixty species of birds in and through the garden since we went 'indigenous' and we look forward to many more with water available. The acacias should provide good nesting sites but no luck so far; even providing mud for swallows came to naught - they didn't survive the floods in East Africa some years ago and have yet to return. Our only success has been putting out a piece of drain filter fabric which the bulbuls and sunbirds use to fix and line their nests - in the neighbouring gardens.

But, in November 1999 a pair of Cape wagtails, common around Hilton; friendly little birds and a joy to watch, often flying onto the verandah to collect spiders webs and fluff for their nests, decided to choose the *Streptocarpus* pots to nest in. Safe and warm, protected from the heavy rain we have in summer, they sat on the eggs and brooded for so long that we were concerned that the eggs were sterile.

Then, they began to feed the chicks, still invisible in the nest, each parent flying in with food, while keeping a wary eye on us. It took about eighteen days for the chicks to hatch which is longer than normal for wagtails and a quick peek through the curtains close to the nest revealed one chick only and a very large one at that! The first nest we have ever had in thirty-five years of providing a bird habitat, and a redheaded cuckoo had hijacked the nest!

Foster Mum and Dad worked overtime to feed their now oversized 'offspring' but there is plenty for them around as we have an organic policy, with no sprays and only natural fertilizers used. Our cuckoo fledged on 16th December and spent forty-eight hours in the *Combretum* before flying off into the next door exotic foliage! We left the nest alone, and three more eggs were laid. Our hopes for a family of wagtails feeding on our lawn were soon dashed, as a fiscal shrike murdered the babies to feed it's own young.

The literature tells us that with the range of plants we have around us, we should be attracting bush­pigs, warthogs and porcupines. However, being in the suburbs, we are unlikely to see these animals, so we will have to make do with our frogs, shrews, butterflies and all the birds. Molerats we have aplenty and we could certainly do without their voracious appetite for bulbs! Must find some molesnakes to take care of the problem!

While we will never see any of our tree plantings grow to full maturity, we hope that having created an oasis of Natal Midlands plants with their attendant insects and birds, future owners of our home will appreciate what we have only just begun.

Unsuspecting parents.

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