

RIGHT: *Leucospermum cuneiform* on a spring morning.

Photo: C. Emily Dibb.

Garden in the Wind

by C. Emily Dibb



An inspirational garden combines the wild spirit of the fynbos with the traditional English garden.

When I was a child in what was then Matabeleland, it was considered eccentric to have an indigenous garden. A garden, by definition, meant a place where the indigenous vegetation had been swept away to make space for 'real flowers' and vegetables. My notions of what constituted a garden were formed by my grandmothers, who typified the two kinds of gardening that prevailed in Bulawayo in the first half of the Twentieth Century. Granny Wightman married at seventeen and trekked by wagon from Kimberley to the tiny settlement of Bulawayo. What she craved in this desolation of heat and dust were flowers, and her small garden in Abercorn Street was a fragrant smother of soft sweet things. Against a bank of canna lilies, she had dianthus and cleome, stocks and snapdragon, linaria and sweet William, phlox and pansies. Roses and amaryllis were grown in four-gallon paraffin tins. The garden was protected from the dust of the street by a hedge of sand-olive. Sun was what her flowers needed and shade was only to be had on the stoep.

Granny Greenfield, by contrast, lived on the outskirts of Bulawayo. She married a Minister in the Presbyterian Kirk, coming to Africa from Scotland at twenty-nine. They purchased a number of acres of well-treed granite koppies separated by open vleis of waving assegai grass. The simple stone house on the top of a koppie, was dwarfed by the great boulders that surrounded it. There was shade everywhere, from a sprawling rock fig and a giant marula, *Erythrina* trees, an indaba tree, bush willows (*Combretum*) and wild syringas all growing among the rocks and close to the house. The upper terraces were clothed in aloes that flamed into flower in winter and sparkled with sunbirds and orioles. Not a rose bloomed in Granny Greenfield's garden, there were no bright beds of sweet fragrance, no tumble of blossom. For the

nine months of the year when there was no rain, this part of the garden remained bone-dry. Water from the well was used for the orchard and vegetable beds. Beyond the garden was the veld, the waving assegai grass and an infinity of little highveld trees, many deliciously laden with edible fruit: monkey orange and donkey berry, wild fig and sweet thorn, wild gardenia, snot apple and sour plum. As a child, I made no distinction between 'the garden' and 'the veld', it was all part of Granny Greenfield's garden.

I have Granny Wightman's adoration of the soft sweet scented things of the flower garden, but I continue to revel in the vigour of indigenous plants and would not like to do without one or the other.

One of the recurring themes of the famous landscapers of Europe is that the immediate environs of the house should be reserved for the most sophisticated plants, while those with wilder and less-cultured associations should be kept to the peripheries. I can see the value of this, there is always a sense of comfort and ease in the presence of the familiar and the well-mannered, be it human or vegetable. But I believe that in today's overcrowded world, most of us long for our homes as a place to which we can escape from the pressures of urban life. If the vegetation that surrounds the home carries something of the aura of the mountain side and the wilderness, so much the better.

When I tried my hand at gardening in the hostile environment of Muizenberg in the Western Cape, I found that none of my previous gardening experience was of any assistance. I had thought to have an old world garden to go with my old world house, and to sprinkle it with an appropriate selection of lovely indigenous plants. But here, in the teeth of gale-force salt-laden winds, and in soil that was apparently seven parts

stone, two parts sand and one part salt, nothing thrived. The few treasured indigenous tree seedlings that I had brought with me from the highveld succumbed almost at once - the candelabra euphorbia survived cheerfully for a few months, until the night it was crunched up by the resident porcupine. (I scarcely knew whether to be more upset about the loss of the euphorbia, or concerned for Porky's digestion. However, he came to no harm and continued his raids with undiminished enthusiasm.)

Within the conventional repertoire of garden plants, French lavender and the opium poppy burgeoned and flourished, and they and the ubiquitous California poppy and the Cape's winter miracle, *Senecio elegans*, held the garden together. Our initial clearing out of alien pine, blue gum and Port Jackson vegetation revealed the presence of a few mutilated remnants of *Cassine peragua*, the false saffronwood that is endemic to the original coastal forest. I hoped that with trimming and tender encouragement, these might be persuaded to give a little new growth. There were also, it turned out, several of the native camphors, *Tarchonanthus camphoratus*, and quite a number of unidentifiable stumps that still showed signs of life and were presumably all that remained of two centuries of woodcutters' handiwork. This was turning into a salvage operation, rather than a creative endeavour, but it held out the hope that since trees grew here once, they could do so again. I put in several young yellowwoods, a milkwood and a stinkwood, and dreamed the usual dreams of those who plant forest giants when they themselves are the wrong side of fifty.

At this stage, I was still largely unfamiliar with the fynbos. It struck me, coming from the tropics, as unsatisfactory garden material, with flowers for the most part disappointingly small and lacking drama and glamour. A little investigation into the matter indicated a veritable minefield of horticultural caveats that went with the fynbos: mustn't do this and fatal to do that.... well, I wasn't hoping to grow a garden of prima-donnas, if I put in an indigenous plant, I wanted something that could jolly well take care of itself. But time, and continuing failures made me humble, and with the second winter, I began to look at the fynbos with renewed curiosity. My garden was little better than a wasteland, and it was tantalizing to raise my eyes to the cliffs above

Muizenberg and to see them draped with lovely things. Even more agonizing was to walk in the nature reserves and to find the veld dancing with a multitude of glorious flowers. Most of these were quite new to me, and their elegance and refinement left me speechless. I became consumed by the desire to have them in my garden.

But I was on the horns of a dilemma. Roses and hydrangeas and traditional garden flowers require abundant water and feeding, and regular applications of fungicide and pesticide. The fynbos plants, on the other hand, are resentful of conventional gardening practice, and will not tolerate cultivation and feeding, and are highly sensitive to pesticides. It seemed certain that the two could not be grown together.

As I was reluctant to relinquish my dream of an old house nestling in a tumble of old world flowers, I cleared away the remaining rooikrans and eucalyptus on the higher slopes and addressed myself to the challenge of cultivating the fynbos up there. Trying to think as a painter with an unfinished canvas on the easel, I realized that the

mood of the 'picture' was defined by the dominant rhythms of wind and ocean, the movement of the wind over the mountain and in the clouds, and the repetitive rhythm of the waves.

The key to expressing these rhythmic themes was colour, replicating the pervading tonalities, and imitating the pulsations of energy in the living picture. The blues and whites of sea and sky came with agapanthus, aris-tae and sea-stattice. The rhythms of wind on the land and the water were seen in plants with many-stranded vertical growth-lines - the restios were absolutely invaluable, as were all the bulbs with wand-like stems and slender leaves, watsonias and kniphofias, ixias and *Chasmanthe*. The colour-tones of the land were contained within the palette of the native sandstone, everything from deepest wine red and plum, through the rose-reds and strawberry pinks to peach and tawny gold and palest cream.

Now, like Aladdin in the cave, it remained only to cram into my garden the contents of the rich caskets of jewels contained in the fynbos. This marked

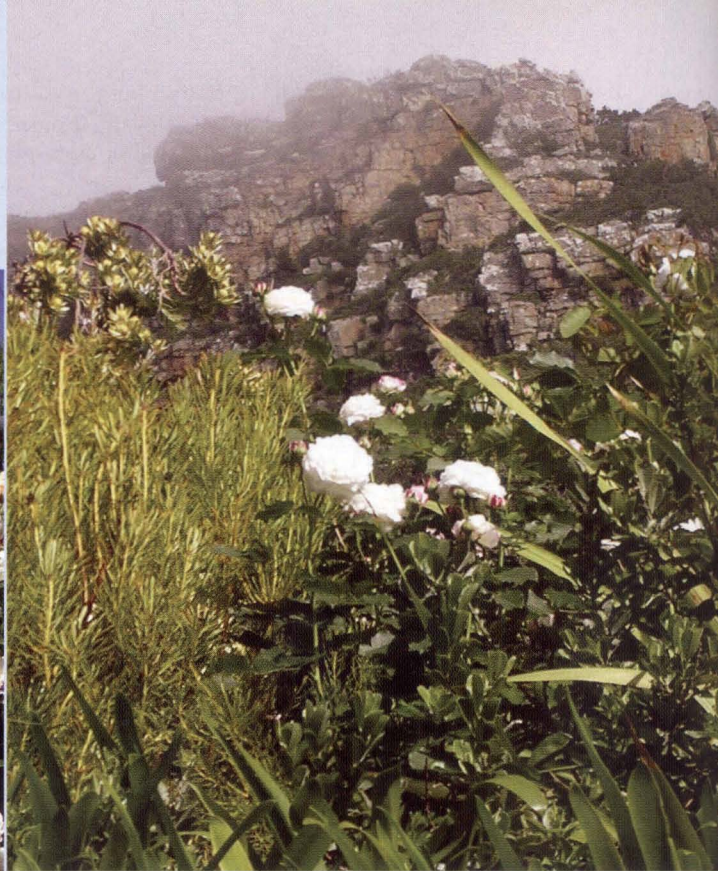


LEFT: Unlikely bedfellows: a rhododendron and *Mimetes hottentoticus*.



BELOW: Morning sun and the glory of leucadendrons, with Rhodes Cottage behind them. Photos: C. Emily Dibb.

BELOW: The Old World Rose 'Buff Beauty' living in harmony with the hybrid *Leucospermum* 'Tango'. Photos: C. Emily Dibb.



ABOVE: The old Cape favourite rose 'Boule de neige' shelters in the lee of a *Leucadendron platyspermum*.

the beginning of an enchanted journey of discovery and adventure, and as with all fairy-tales, it led to a love affair with proteas. Like most love affairs, it didn't all go smoothly. In my eagerness not to over-water my new plants, I lost many to the heat of summer. I learned that there are no absolutes. 'Enough water' here, may not be enough water just over there, and what is enough for this protea, will be too much for that one. I began to see why certain species of naturally occurring proteas tend to gather together in certain localities. Their individual needs can be very specific, and what will grow brilliantly on that side of the mountain may not do at all well on this (different light, different wind, higher water-table). I learned that for young proteas the key word is 'damp'. They should never dry out completely for the first three years of their life.

I found myself drawn increasingly towards the concepts of organic gardening. Granular fertilizer was to be avoided, even organic food was to be administered only sparingly. Digging out weeds was taboo, mulching was absolutely essential to nourish and shelter the tiny plants. It was really possible to do entirely without pesticides, for many of the proteas come with built-in protection. The odd bit of beetle damage, the odd spot of disease,

but by and large the plants did better the less I did for them.

Very soon it became clear that the indigenous section of my garden was gaining hand over fist, and making far more of a show than my poor old roses and hydrangeas. With the flowering of my first proteas and leucospermums, the love-affair became a full-blooded passion, and that autumn I extended the indigenous garden still further and began encroaching downwards into what I had thought of as the 'tame garden'. It was only a matter of time before the proteas and roses were side-by-side. Another revelation came with the maturing of the leucadendrons. Their incandescent properties were astounding and each leaf lit up under the sun like a shard of stained glass. A group of them had all the luminous glory of a cathedral window.

By now I had given up conventional gardening entirely. Fertilizers and pesticides were a thing of the past, but there was still the issue of water. I had to keep reminding myself of one of the fundamental principles of organic gardening – lush growth encourages weakness, and weakness encourages disease. Better to make do with stumpier, healthier plants, and sacrifice something of the luxury. Even the hydrangeas and rhododendrons, reluctant fellow travel-

lers at first, accepted the new routine; apparently relishing the shade provided by a *Cussonia spicata* and the society of a *Mimetes hottentoticus*. On this difficult site, proteas are the best of companions for roses, cheerfully taking over the role of protector. My moss rose, for instance, which valiantly tried to flower year after year but had its buds blighted by the south-easter, now smothers itself in a cloud of petals and bursting buds, in the lee of a *Protea longifolia*. It shares its space with pink and cream alstroemeria, a *Selago canescens* and an *Erica mammosa*. Then, when the rose goes off, as the Old Roses do, there is a continuing pageant of colour from the fynbos.

Behind them, in the same line of vision, there is a large tuft of the restio *Thamnochortus insignis* and a *Leucadendron tinctum*, in which Roserie de la Hay has insinuated itself. Their purplish hues are wonderfully complimentary, and a *Jamesbrittenia grandiflora* nearby picks up the blue tint of their purples.

In the White Garden, the Bourbon rose Boule de Nieve has snuggled into the embrace of a *Leucadendron platyspermum*. The white-and-lime-green combination is deliciously cool and pleasing. In close proximity are a white *Hemerocallis*, a white *Podalyria calyptata* and the white-flowering

Leucospermum bolusii, one of the few of the proteas with a fruity fragrance. At the other end of the white garden, *Rosa Carnea Multiflora* grew to huge dimensions under the protection of a silver tree *Leucadendron argenteum*. When its single grand flush in spring is over, its snowy splendour is continued at a lower level by *Phyllica ericoides* and *Coleonema alba*, and then just before Christmas, the icy theme is reinforced by the exploding buds of the pure white California tree poppy, that loves the wretched soil like all the others of its tribe.

Close to the house my wisteria that snivelled and grumbled for three years, is thriving in the lee of a two leucadendrons, (*L. discolor* and a hybrid *L. laureolum*). And the English honeysuckle, which I adore and which at first seemed unable to flower, in November commences to fling out great arms of blossom among the glowing branches of *Leucadendron* 'Safari Sunset' and a *Leucospermum* 'Flamespike'. Their

colour-match is incomparable, and the three look spectacular together in a vase. The very old shrub rose China variety 'Mutabilis', is highly tolerant of poor light, poor soil and reduced watering, and its unusual colours make it a wonderful companion for the watsonias and *Leucadendron* 'Long Tom'. To see all of these with the afternoon sun shining through them making their colours flare is utterly bewitching.

It is still necessary from time to time to make certain that the proteas are not getting suffocated by their loving companions. They are, and always will be, wild things, and they need a rush of air under their wings to keep them free of leaf disorders.

Meanwhile, the torn and hacked stumps of the former coastal forest has struggled into new life. It turns out that there are several *Olea capensis*, an ironwood, one or two *Euclea racemosa*, and a very energetic candlewood. Several small *Maurocena frangula* trees of orderly disposition and great dig-

nity of bearing, even when tiny, have appeared. This embryonic indigenous forest of the future now blends with the domineering proteas, which are relatively short-lived as trees go. In time, no doubt, the tables will turn.

Yes, there are those who stoutly maintain that they don't wish to see proteas in their gardens, thank you, although they are quite happy to see them in the veld. And there are those who hold to the opposite viewpoint, that if you are going to have a fynbos garden, then kindly do not contaminate its sanctity with a lot of horticultural vermin from other parts of the world. But fortunately gardening, like painting or music, caters for many different tastes. In the eyes of the gardener, there is never a moment of completion, and no such thing as the perfect effect. Beauty in the garden - more so than any other art - is ephemeral, vulnerable to drought as well as to fire, a creation of the heart of man, but as insubstantial and frail as the petals that make it.



FAR LEFT: *Leucospermum oleifolium* flourishing above False Bay.

LEFT: *Leucadendron* 'Candles' against the backdrop of the Muizenberg mountains.

BELOW: The garden in early October with *Leucadendron* 'Wilson's wonder' in the foreground.
Photos: C. Emily Dibb.

