

My Karoo koppie

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As the seasons come and go, so the plant displays and colours change from the different shades of green in winter to the silver grey and deep russets of summer.



Adromiscus filicaulus

Twenty kilometers south of Worcester is Draaivlei, 516 ha of land that my family (seven grandchildren included) regards as our own special corner of the Karoo. For most of the year this stretch of veld at first glance appears to be grey and almost devoid of life but a closer look reveals a treasure trove of interesting and unusual plants, all of which have had to adapt to the extreme climate. As the seasons come and go, so the plant displays and colours change from the different shades of green in winter to the silver grey and deep russets of summer.

The Karoo rocks form a background to the plants, some pinnaced and others smooth and rounded. Lichens grow on their surfaces giving a mélange of colours from white, green, orange and black. Everywhere there are magnificent combinations of texture, colour and form.

Succulent

Leaf succulents such as *Crassula*, *Aloe microstigma* and *Cotyledon* are dotted around. (*Crassus* is a Latin word meaning thick, referring to the fleshy leaves that store water.)



Aspalathus quinguedentata

One of my favourites is the ever-changing concertina bush or sosatiebos *Crassula rupestris* with its thick, fleshy maroon, red and orange edged leaves threaded in rows along the stems. The flowers are crowded in clusters and change colour from light pink to a deep, dark russet in the heart of summer. *Crassula atropurpurea* and *Crassula subaphylla* are lovely dwarf shrubs with delicate clusters of flowers. Plakkies *Cotyledon orbiculata* are plentiful; their leaves have a waxy layer to reduce water loss, and the flowers are suspended like tubular bells on long stalks. The euphorbias remain green throughout the year, giving a softness to the hillside. Geelmelkbos *Euphorbia mauritanica* has yellow green stems with the most unusual flowers appearing in May. In contrast, soetmelkbos *Euphorbia burmannii* has a darker green stem and despite its milky latex is well grazed by our nine gemsbok.

The plants grow mainly in colonies, closely interspersed, protecting one another from drought and heat. An interesting shrub is *Tylecodon paniculatus*, commonly known as botterboom. This miniature tree stands up to 2 m high with a peeling, papery, thick succulent trunk. The leaves are fleshy, smooth and bright green, changing as summer approaches when water is conserved by shedding leaves before producing tubular flowers that open in late spring and early summer. The flowers are dull and red-streaked with re-curved lobes, similar to the plakkie.

Tough and drought resistant

The drought resistant 'anker Karoo' *Pentzia incana* is a low lying, grey green



Cotyledon orbiculata

shrub with tiny yellow, button-like flower heads. Long wandering roots send out branches that bend over and take root where they touch the soil. This is the well-known Karoo bush that gives Karoo lamb that subtle herb flavour.

Our koppie has four species of the extremely hardy, drought resistant *Pteronia*, a low growing groundcover that provides a protective habitat for other plants. *Pteronia paniculata* (gombossie) is a woody shrub with resinous, tightly rolled, olive green leaves. *Pteronia fasciculata* (parafienbos) is a more rigid shrub covered with narrow, sticky bright green leaves that contrast with the small grey leaves of *Pteronia incana* that give this plant its common Afrikaans name of asbossie (little ashen bush). *Pteronia ovalifolia* (grysbos) is a beautiful rounded, silver grey, soft bush with large yellow flowers at the branch tips and bracts that are white and woolly. All of these species of *Pteronia* have bright yellow flowers.

A very interesting shrub, looking like a bonsai, is *Othonna retrofracta*. Its stem is swollen, fleshy and dark grey, and it bursts into yellow flowers at a time when there is very little colour in the veld. After flowering, soft blue green leaves appear in tufts.

Scented

On the lower slopes, many of the



Helichrysum moeserianum

bushes are strongly scented. The wild buchu *Diosma ramosissima* has volatile oils stored in glands found dotted in rows on the under leaf. *Euchaetis pungens* with its tiny white flowers emits a strong peppery smell if its sticky leaves are crushed. The rather unusual blomkoolmalva *Pelargonium alternans* grows here, as does *Pelargonium radulifolium* with its subterranean tuber, and thick, rigid, prominently veined, dull green leaves. Its flower gives off a cinnamon scent as evening approaches.

A variety of geophytes (plants with underground storage organs) are scattered amongst the shrubs and these come ablaze in the spring. *Lapeirousia jacquinii* is found on the lower slopes; and the naeltjie *L. pyramidalis* grows on stony ground, the pyramid-shaped buds opening to form a cluster of fragrant, white to pale blue or pink, tubular flowers.

Trees

There are not too many trees on Draaivlei. The ghwarrie *Euclea undulata* is a very slow growing tree, its name derived from an old Khoi Khoi word meaning berry. Its umbrella shape provides shade and many animals eat the nutritious berries when they ripen and turn black. The leaves are wavy, hard and dark green. The water-seeking root system has lateral roots that extend in a wide circle around the tree. The ghwarries here, although small, are said to be well over a hundred years old.

Rub rub berry or baardbossie *Rhus intricata* is deciduous with trifoliate dark green leaflets with toothed margins. Taaibos *Rhus undulata* is aromatic and evergreen, with trifoliate leaves that are distinctly wavy. These small trees are the largest of the shrubs to be found in our veld and we



Crassula atropurpurea

welcome



Euchaetis pungens

their shade. Mistletoe *Viscum capense* and *Moquiniella rubra* favour the *Rhus* species, and their orange berries (much sought after by birds) look as if they are part of the *Rhus*.

Sand olives *Dodonaea viscosa* var. *angustifolia* are evergreen many stemmed shrubs with narrow shiny light green leaves that are a paler green on the underside, often sticky and resinous. They are used medicinally to allay fevers, sore throats and the common cold. It is a useful shrub for consolidating sandy areas. Their seed capsules with their papery wings give them a soft and pretty look. This small tree is regarded as an indicator of an ecotone between fynbos and Karoo veld types.

The sweet thorn or soetdoring *Acacia karroo* is a commonly occurring, palatable small tree that grows up to 12 m. Its round yellow ball flowers, sickle shaped seed pods and slender white spines make it a very attractive Karoo tree indeed.

Fynbos in the Karoo

On the lower slopes of Draaivlei koppie, where the karroid scrub meets the fynbos, a different plant community occurs. Large stands of plants belonging to the Restionaceae (sometimes known as Cape reeds) dominate the veld. When the sun falls on the 2 m tall stems of the sonkwasriet *Willdenowia incurvata* the dark green colour of the stems contrast spectacularly with the bronze colour of the bracts. The male and female plants of the 'restio' species are strikingly different making identification very complicated.

As spring approaches, many dead looking shrubs are transformed. The geelstertjiebos *Lebeckia cytisoides* becomes a soft-stemmed shrub with silvery grey leaves and, in August, yellow honey scented flowers. *Wiborgia obcordata*, and *W. mucronata* produce yellow flowers in small sprays typical of the Fabaceae or pea family. Growing



Crassula subaphylla

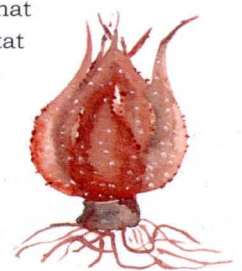
between the *Euclea* and *Rhus* trees, the wolwedoring *Lycium oxycarpum*, produces leaves after the first rains. Birds are attracted to the tubular mauve flowers and shiny red fruits. There is a superstition that when the leaves fall off this tall and hardy shrub, drought is around the corner.

Another fynbos species that grows in loose sandy soil here, is the sandveld pincushion *Leucospermum rodolentum*. It is an erect shrub with silvery grey-green leaves that are covered in hairs, and the flowers are a deep yellow and occur in clusters.

In May, the veld comes alive with many different *Oxalis* species and then, in August the brilliantly coloured vygies take over. The Worcester vygie *Drosanthemum speciosum* has leaves that consist of large water-filled cells causing it to glisten in the sun, and flowers that are orange or red. *Ruschia caroli* with its splendid purple flowers, is plentiful. The daisy family is represented here by *Helichrysum hebelepsis*, *H. rutilans* and *H. moeserianum*, all with grey felted leaves and bright yellow flowers.

And last but not least is the renosterbos *Elytropappus* rhinocerotis*, the dull olive green bush that dominates the veld. It has no grazing value, no pretty flowers and is highly inflammable. It is however, a pioneer plant that provides a habitat for the numerous geophytes.

*See note about the name change of this genus from *Elytropappus* to *Dicrothamnus* on page 165.



Aloe microstigma