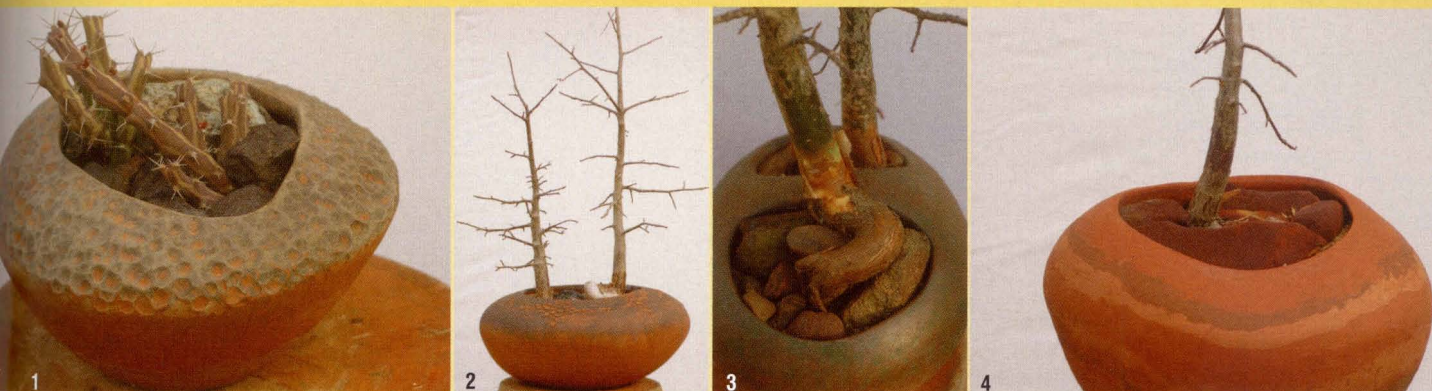


The art of ornamental container planting

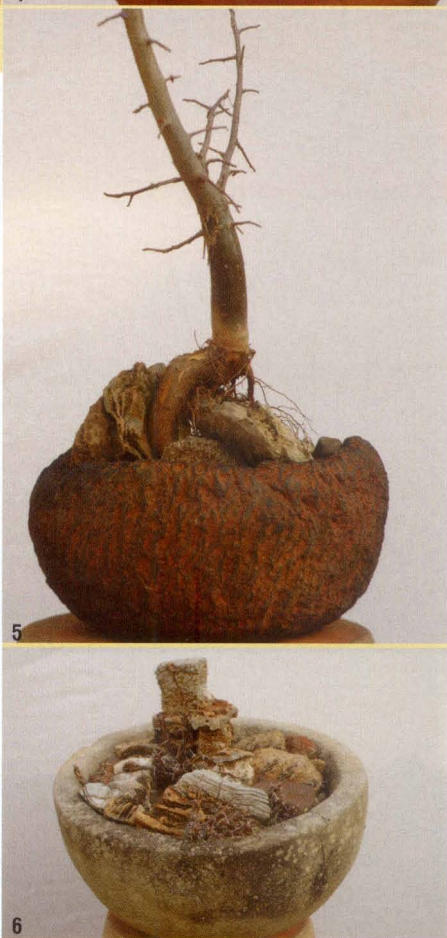


by Charles Craib

Creative container plantings using indigenous plants requires an aesthetic understanding of the natural habitats in which the plants are found. Containers should be inspired by the shapes and textures of the surrounding rocks, pebbles and soil, as well as the annual growth cycles and physical attributes of the plants themselves. Most classic containers represent a stylised abstraction from nature. They are little more than soil in a flat-topped container into which plants are placed. It was apparent to me that a conceptual shift was required to blend nature with the character of the container into a form of 'living art'. Chris Patton, a craftsman potter living near Johannesburg, was able to translate my ideas and requirements into reality.

Colours, shapes and forms in nature are extremely variable and the plant, in its context, changes colour during the day with alterations in light intensity. The rich colours of the early morning and late afternoon contrast markedly with the bleached shades in the middle of the day. Shadows cast by the plant and its surroundings, are also ever changing. This needs to be captured within the confined context of the container.

Rock finishes around the plant are planned according to the natural habitat of the species and the structure and texture of the container, and can vary from rocks, pebbles and shales to coarse grit. A very versatile container has a rough finish with a black or brown burnish resembling sheets of exposed rock, with uneven rims at different elevations. This texture lends itself to plantings featuring dolerite and dolomite rocks. The variations produced by Chris Patton on these containers allow for a huge repertoire of rocks and pebbles for use around the plant - as you can see in the accompanying illustrations. ♻️



1: A sense of depth and place needs to be created in a limited surface area, sometimes as small as 10 cm across. This can be achieved by using different coloured rocks, shale or stones. The darkest rocks are wedged in at deeper levels whilst those of a lighter colour often protrude above the rim of the pot. This diminutive vessel made by Chris Patton, has an interesting surface with numerous concave dents resembling a glaciated sheet of exposed rock. The design is repeated on a larger scale where a *Euphorbia* species nestles amongst black rocks. The tone is lifted by a piece of dolomite with a pale, powdery blue surface.

2: In this Chris Patton oblong container, a few black worn dolomite pebbles suggest the colour and texture on the upper surface of the vessel. The exposed grey root of one *Commiphora harveyi* can be seen.

3: This vessel, created by Chris Patton, lends itself to an exploration of the symmetry in *Commiphora* roots and trunks. The roots of these two *Commiphora harveyi* form an S-bend when the container is viewed from one side and from another they contrast with one another as one root is below the surface of the pot and another above it. The trunks of the two plants appear as one at the base and then move away from one another in a mass of twigs and branches.

4: Chris Patton made this beautiful vessel from several colours of clay. These subtly run into one another, resembling natural variations found in ochre shale, their bands of colour accentuating the uneven rim of the pot. The *Commiphora harveyi* has been planted off centre amongst soft, dark sandstone rocks. These are water retentive for over 4 hours after watering, the rich colours of the wet sandstone gradually fading as it dries out.

5: This *Commiphora harveyi* was grown in a plastic pot for about 6 years to prepare the roots for exposure over rocks, and then planted into this Chris Patton container. The roots appear prominently amongst the fissured limestone rocks, yet from another perspective they are deeply recessed amongst the sombre colours of the dolomite.

6: Carved from sandstone by stonemasons in Lesotho, this container has been weathered for a few years in the sun and rain. A *Euphorbia* species, grown from seed sown in the container amongst the dolomite, norite, quartzite and sandstone rocks, blends into the weathered vessel and the rocks, achieving a pleasing unity.

Photos: Connall Oosterbroek.

The author, Charles Craib, and photographer, Connall Oosterbroek, are currently preparing a book on natural landscaping with indigenous plants, that will include chapters on replicating natural conditions in container plantings.