

MY WILD GARDEN

A foot in both camps.

Text and illustrations by
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You can't get much wilder than my garden. We live in a stony little kloof in the lee of the Outeniqua Mountains, which appears to have more sand, snakes and scorpions than vegetation. However, it is a treasure trove of unusual and very beautiful plants. Like many people new to the area, I first attempted to fill the garden with the indigenous plants that I had brought with me, thinking that being wild they would flourish. Not so – even the hardy milkwoods curled up their leaves as if to shy away from this unremitting heat. So, mourning the loss of some old favourites I ventured out to see what occurs here naturally.

Our property is predominantly fynbos on the south-facing kranzes and succulent Karoo on the northern ones with a spill-over in between. After the tiniest smattering of rain in spring the fynbos slopes come alive with royal blue lobostemons, coral trumpets of ericas, heavy headed *Brunsvigia*, dainty white *Scabiosa*, delicate lobelias,

pelargoniums of the most wonderful variety and masses of felicias. Then there are the stalwarts, which don't even ask for water. Apricot-lipped oxalis peep from under the hot rocks and the little yellow and orange hermannias nod approvingly at the fierce sun. *Arctotis*, white and yellow, and the buttercup-hued

Senecio flower throughout the year as do the little buttons of *Pentzia*. *Eberlanzia ferox*, with iridescent purple faces, glory in the heat.

There are no large trees on these slopes but the leucospermums give shade to the *Asclepias* and provide a cheerful yellow splash. There are many



Protea nitida shrubs with their whorled trunks, *Osyris compressa* and some species of *Rhus*. Then there are special finds, such as the *Ferraria crispa* which I discovered nestling among some rocks on the floodplain of the spruit (stream) which courses through our land, and the *Haemanthus coccineus* which sprang up in hundreds after a burn. There are ferns and orchids too, but I am unable to identify them all.

A hundred metre walk brings one into another wonderful world: the Karoo biome. Here, among the rocks, the giant bulb of *Pachypodium succulentum* puts out its delicate star shaped crimson and white flowers. Bunches of *Crassula rupestris* cascade over the cliffs and fall unceremoniously over the apricot trumpets of the cotyledons. Here and there the flaky bulb of a *Boophane* puts up a wavy hand of leaves, which is followed by its spiky flower. One of the most exciting finds was a small *Anacampseros lanceolata* which had tucked itself under one of the sand olives that occur prolifically on this side. Its gorgeous pink flowers made it an immediate favourite.



Anacampseros lanceolata, found on the northern slopes of our wild garden and transplanted into the tended garden after it had been painted, now flowers more often than its bush cousins.



Ferraria crispa, found on the floodplain of our little spruit, was re-planted (after being painted) into my tended garden and produces a regular mass of flowers each year.

So too are the brave suteras, which ask for nothing and give such a glorious mauve show. Among the krantzies, selagos of many varieties are often strangled by the creeping species of *Cucumis*. Although it is unpalatable when the berries are green, one of my greatest loves is the *Solanum* which puts out its potato-like flowers and bright fruit, even in the harshest times. I was excited to discover hundreds of *Lapeirousia pyramidalis*, with their stacked leaves and dainty white and purple flowers poking out of the bracts. Delicate moraeas stick their heads out from under any stone as do the prolific stapelias and duvalias. It is a great joy to catch them flowering.

On the Karoo krantzies there is not much colour so a brightness arrives with the fruiting of the parasitic *Viscum* and *Moquinella rubra* which seem to favour shrubs of the *Rhus* species. There are many aloes here: the most spectacular of which is *Aloe ferox*. They proudly send up red flares each July and, judging by their size, must be very old. I have carefully nurtured a few of the lovely *Nymania capensis* that occur sparingly in the rocks and they reward me with their droplet puce flowers and puffy seed heads.

My untended garden extends to the boundaries of our property but what is tended are those plants which I am forced, as a botanical artist, to dig up in order to record the bulbs and root systems. These are painted as quickly as possible and then returned to the earth under my care. I get untold pleasure from seeing the *Anacampseros lanceolata* throw up a gorgeous pink head every day while its bush cousins are reluctant to show. The *Ferraria crispa* has a regular mass of flowers each year and delights me with its strange brown and yellow twists of petals. The succulents have also enjoyed a bit of tender loving care and the *Gasteria disticha* lolls in the shade of the *Deinbollia* to shoot out its snake-like head of red bells once a year. This was an interesting lesson to me for it would not flower until someone suggested that I put it under the protection of another plant as it would occur in nature. Clearly every day is a school day if one wants to garden successfully here.

I am happy to have a few old friends surviving among their Karoo and fynbos residents. The purple *Tulbaghia* thrusts its lovely crown among the spikes of yellow *Bulbine*, while gazanias of all colours fall over the pathways. A new blue *Plumbago* is fighting away but I'm sure it will survive to feed the butterflies that love its little flowers.

It's a hodge-podge, old and new wild garden that I have had the privilege of creating and nurturing in these very unkind conditions. 🌱

PROFILE OF THE ARTIST

I can't say whether it's born in you, or whether it's acquired. All I can say is that it is a compulsion. Since I was a little girl I felt a deep kindred with the earth and the things that spring from it. I would depart from home at 7 am with nothing to eat or drink and only the companionship of my dog and spend the day looking and watching and thinking about the nature around me. Perhaps that early solitude and concentrated observation laid the foundation of what was to become my life, my passion. At the age of five or six I started to draw crude flowers and little goggas attending them. And, like flowers, I grew and grew throughout my life, often having to do other things because that was the current demand, but always painting.

I had no formal training apart from school art, and so was able to develop naturally without the stays of style in mode. As a young adult I branched out, away from my first love, nature. I tried nudes in pastel, portraits in pencil, caricatures in ink, and although I was happy in the discovery, I never felt quite at peace. Finally, at the age of forty, in Sodwana, Zululand, I came home. Surrounded by the immense wealth of flora around me I was compelled to record the loveliness. Water-colour is an appropriate medium for the delicacy of plants, so I set out to master it. Perhaps this sounds like a monumental task for one as unschooled as I, yet I had the greatest tutor of all: love. Love and dedication to what I was doing. In clumsy attempts grasses and trees and butterflies fell down on paper. I started growing then as the flowers I had plucked withered and died. But the most pertinent growth was the artistic philosophy that budded. I began to understand that it is not

merely the accurate representation of the plant that is important, but the ability to communicate, on paper, its essence. In order to achieve this quality, I would spend a long time studying the subject: in light, in shadow, from the back and front and upside down. I got to know the plant so well that I could have closed my eyes and painted it blind. I had internalized its botanical form, its colour, its suggested hues, but most of all, its character. To explain what I mean by 'character', some flowers like *Dietes* look dense when one takes a first impression. But hold the petals to the light and not only is there the most delicate venation, but also a transparency and iridescence too. I spent many hours and many poor attempts trying to capture, on a flat piece of paper, those contradictory characters, and sometimes, in a whole composition I would get one, just one small aspect, right.

Today, at fifty-one I am still on my rock-strewn journey. Working yet to get it right. My mentors are the botanical artists who have been acclaimed for their brilliance and dedication: Auriol Batten, Thalia Lincoln, Cythna Letty, Ellaphie Ward-Hillhorst and many others. I study their techniques endlessly and while adopting that which I relate to, continue to stamp ME upon what I translate. It is a sadness to me that botanical artists* are few in this country and are largely unacclaimed. My naturalistic ardour fears that much of our heritage will go unrecorded under the relentless march of urbanization. I dedicate myself to this art and will spend my time attempting to be a stepping stone: a translator of the wild.

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*The newly formed Botanical Artists' Association of Southern Africa ensures that botanical artists stay in touch and informs its members of various exhibitions, activities and courses. It is open to anyone interested in botanical illustration, even non-artists. Further details can be obtained from BAASA, 1 Marcella Crescent, Newlands 7700, or via e-mail at <bulbin@iafrica.com>.