

## At the Edge - *Where Design meets Nature*

It is now Aloe Season, and visitors to this garden are hard pressed to choose between gazing ahead at the stunning gorge view or drinking in the bright display of an African winter covering the slope far below you. The wooden deck that wraps around the front corner is the first port o' call for everyone. Ahead of you is Krantzkloof Nature Reserve fading into the distant horizon. To the left, an outstanding form of *Albizia adianthifolia* that marks the change in levels from house to garden. Below, *Aloe ferox*, *A. vanbalenii*, *Leonotis*, *Hypoestes*, *Erythrina*, *Kniphofia*, *Strelitzia* – winter favourites that never fail to delight.

The house sits at the top edge of a steep slope that drops sharply towards a line of stone cliffs, a stunning view that sold the property to Chris Dalzell and Pam Evans. In summer, *Cyrtanthus* species (Inanda Lily) crowd the rock face with scarlet flowers, visible even from this distance, thriving in the moist shade where leaf mulch collects in small crevices. What would scare the average gardener, though, did not deter Chris, with years of experience in landscaping both here and abroad. Past curator of Durban Botanic Gardens, he is perhaps, most well-known for his work as Assistant Director for the Gardens by the Bay project in Singapore, considered to be the most ambitious horticultural project ever undertaken. Still, it required site knowledge and planning to get it right, so they put the garden on hold until renovation work on the house was complete; this would give Chris time to become familiar with local garden conditions. 7 years on, trees and shrubs are maturing, and the success of the design is evident.

### The Piece de Resistance - The front garden

The borrowed backdrop is exceptional and influenced the master plan; keep the view of the gorge open; blend property edges with the surrounding natural landscape; use locally indigenous plants where ever possible to ensure a water-wise and low maintenance landscape. Chris is often away and so limited his plant choices to species that would survive the challenging site conditions and lengthy periods of neglect.

### Creating the Framework:

With little existing material to distract him, Chris began with a framework of paths that would create order on the open slope and section it off into more manageable sized beds. The snaking path is cut along the gradient to reduce the incline, with steps curving down to the next level and a change in direction. Where the angle was too steep, steps with a deep tread make the descent a lot easier. Chris recommends marking the edges of the path with chalk first, giving you a chance to reduce mistakes - widen or narrow where needed - before the excavations begin. Beginning at the top of the slope, the entire pathway was dug and

supporting walls built before adding a single plant. Gum pole walls, lined with weed guard fabric to prevent soil seepage, hold back the ground on each side of the path. “In hindsight,” says Chris, “it was a mistake not to secure the poles with cement.” Good advice that will help to provide extra strength and longevity particularly on steep ground.

With the path forming the spine of the garden, the plants would flesh out the design. The long-lasting trees and shrubs were first in, and positioning was critical; shrubby screens along the side fences give privacy from neighbours, and now partially hide a distant road. Other shrub mixes, *Halleria lucida*, *Gardenia thunbergia*, *Leonotis*, *Aloe arborescens*, *Duvernoia adhatodoides*, amongst others, planted off-centre and below eye-level from deck height, frame the distant gorge and link the east/west property edges. Equally important, they provide movement corridors for the large wildlife populations the garden shares with the Nature Reserve below.

### Colour Scheme:

It is a garden seen at its best from autumn through winter. Cool blue and purple *Plectranthus* dominate the autumn scene – and not only in the shade. *Plectranthus ecklonii* shows its adaptability to full sun and shallow soils, as long as rainfall is moderate, forming dense shrub-level cover across the length of the high cement-stack wall below the deck. As the seasons change, mauve *Hypoestes aristata* unfurl to blend with the various shades of orange, yellow and reds of winter flowers - *Kniphofia*, *Aloe*, Honeysuckle, and *Leonotis*. Glorious. A white flowering *Tetradenia riparia* gloried in the space beneath the top-of-slope Flatcrown, where it tumbled with a Ribbon Bush and Krantz Aloe, but it rather bullied the smaller shrubs and has been removed. One of its self-seeded progeny now mixes with *Plumbago*, *Tecomaria* (Honeysuckle), and *Polygala myrtifolia* higher up at the edge of the deck. The property is smaller than first impressions suggest; trees from the nature reserve blur seamlessly with those within the garden, and a line of *Plectranthus ecklonii* hide the fence line with a mass of colour through autumn – white, pink, purple - though it is visible now through the thinning winter foliage. My favourite spot in the winter garden is along the bottom path that runs across the breadth of the ground. Here, *Aloe arborescens* and *Kniphofia* species edging the walkway meet the canopies of the Flatcrown growing in the Nature Reserve, fed by roots far below where we stand. A heady feeling of being able to touch the sky while still rooted in the ground. Used to trees spreading their canopies far above us it is a great treat to see tree-top flowers and watch the antics of the various wildlife species at this level. Broad steps guide you back to the top, a small forest of Dragon Trees (*Dracaena alectrifomis*) and shade cover beneath a mixed canopy of trees – *Ziziphus mucronata*, Flatcrown, *Harpephyllum caffrum* (Wild Plum), *Tabernaemontana ventricosa* (Toad Tree) – a grouping that screens the deck level from the neighbouring property.

The dark, slender bark of a *Dombeya rotundifolia* signals the final curve in the path as it levels out and brings you back into the sunshine where you are greeted by a curtain of a pale blue *Plumbago auriculata* tumbling down from the viewing deck. At the furthest point of the path axis that leads back up to the deck, you meet the stately Flatcrown from below; an impressive sight.

### The Entrance:

Almost forgotten in a rush to get to the view, is the small entrance garden that guides you from the roadside gate to the house and around to the pool level. Aloes in a variety of colours fringe a gravel path, providing a warm welcome at this time as they draw you towards the front door; *Aloe vanbalenii*, *A. chabaudii*, and seven-year-old *Aloe ferox*. They give structure to the less-orderly perennials and groundcovers at their feet. These planting companions are left alone for much of the year, only maintained when grasses need cutting back and lanky top growth trimmed. A few self-seeded plants, like *Ornithogalum longbracteata*, pop up through the leaves, pulled out where they interfere with another plant, but otherwise left to add charm and fluidity to the design. On the shaded bank above the front door, *Mackaya bella* hides the fence line, trimmed yearly to keep the foliage dense from the ground up. *Plectranthus saccatus*, a lovely small to medium sized shrub for the shade that holds its shape well, grows as a lower level hedge in front. *Plectranthus verticillatus* and *P. ciliatus* form a dense cover down the bank to hide the cement support walls above the gravel path. Less successful in covering the lower Loffelstein structure in front is *Crassula multicava*, and Chris has plans to replace these with the bright green *Plectranthus verticillatus* tumbling down the wall above. The highest wall sees *Barleria obtusa* and *B. repens* tumbling down, matched for exuberance by *Asystasia gangetica*, the Creeping Foxglove. A few Wild Basil plants and Chilli bushes join the melee. The landscaping at the access gate reflects the design inside. A line of trees, underplanted with evergreen shrubs provide a buffer from the street, and gum pole droppers now line the old wire fence – natural materials in keeping with the thatch roof and stone walls of the house. The bare, light grey trunks of two *Erythrina lysistemon* guide you down the steep driveway, with a covering of *Bulbine natalensis* and *Crassula multicava* at ground level. These species do well in the bright light and fast-draining soils beneath them. Where the shade deepens, and the level ground can hold more water, *Plectranthus* species thrive.

It is a garden that perfectly suits both the site and the lifestyle of its manager, one very comfortable in its African surrounds. It is neither too dominated by species that self-seed and decide their own boundaries, nor overly neat and 'gardened within an inch of its life.' A garden that is both tranquil and bustling with movement and life.

If ever I had a chance to wander down, a mug of coffee in hand, to sit on the bench overlooking the Red Hot Pokers and the Flatcrown, I think I may just remain there for the day.

## SYNOPSIS

**CHALLENGES:** North-facing steep slope with sandy, humus-poor soils, resulting in rapid run-off and quick draining conditions. Soil wash- away occurs in heavy rains.

**SOLUTIONS:** Work with the site conditions, but with initial inclusion of compost and fertiliser to improve severely depleted soils and increase water holding capacity. Choose plants with low water needs, able to thrive in sandy soils. Cut a network of paths across the gradient to improve usability and access.

**STEP DESIGN:** When changing levels: keep the riser (the vertical face of the step) shallow and the tread (the horizontal surface you stand on) wide. This ratio offers a more relaxed angle of descent or ascent. Curving steps, as used in this garden, benefit from deeper treads without restricting movement too much. Gum poles strengthen the edge of each step and indicate a change in level.

## PLANT PALETTE

**BOLD FORMS:** Aloe ferox, Aloidendron barberae (previously Aloe barberae), Aloe vanbalenii, Aloe arborescens, A. dyeri, Cycad species, Coddia rudis, Portulacaria afra, Strelitzia reginae, Gardenia thunbergia, Cussonia sphaerocephala

**NEAT PLANTS:** Crassula multicava, Bulbine natalensis, Vygies, Tulbaghia, Agapanthus, Euryops, Aloe chabaudii, Curio crassulaefolius, Ocimum obovatum (=Becium obovata), Polygala myrtifolia (does self-seed), Xylothea kraussiana, Cotyledon orbiculata, Euryops pectinatus

**WILDER & SELF-SEEDING SPECIES:** Hen and Chickens, Setaria megaphylla, S. sphacelata, Aristida junciformis, Melinis nerviglumis, M. repens, Barleria repens, B. obtusa, Kniphofia species, Chlorophytum saundersiae, Leonotis leonurus, Indigofera jucunda, Aptenia cordifolium, Hypoestes aristata, Gomphocarpus physocarpus

**TREES & SHRUBS NOT IN THE TEXT:** Vepris lanceolata, Croton gratissimus, Indigofera jucunda, Dombeya burgessiae, Heteropyxis natalensis, Schotia brachypetala, Halleria lucida, Erythrina lysistemon, Coddia rudis, Portulacaria afra, Duvernoia adhatodoides, Brachylaena discolor, Freylinia tropica, Erythrina humeana