

From Humdrum to Vibrant

By Jenny Dean

A large part of my work is creating gardens within secure gated estates. Residents are only allowed to plant indigenous trees not exotics, and generally, there is a high indigenous to exotic percentage. All this is good news, right? Not necessarily so. Just planting indigenous for the sake of it, while better than using exotics, doesn't always guarantee a wildlife-friendly garden. It depends on a number of factors. The garden pictured here is the perfect example. The original landscaper gave the nod to the indigenous planting rule by using big swathes of large blue agapanthus, *Crassula multicaeva* and hedges of *Freylinia tropica* – but there was no plant diversity at all. A few *Heteropyxis natalensis* (Natal Lavender tree) were planted randomly with scattered specimens of *Aloe ferox*. The underplanting in the sunny areas was simply *Ruschia lineolata*. This resulted in a garden of little interest, not much colour and very little insect or bird life. Not what one wants in an indigenous garden. So while this garden had the prescribed indigenous to exotic ratio, it was largely sterile and certainly not pleasing to the eye. Furthermore, there was nothing to entice birds into the garden. I like to plant trees which act as invitations to birds flying overhead - trees which say "Come on down! There is food here! Insects, fruit, nectar.... this is a good place to be." An ecologically friendly functioning garden is one filled with insects and completely without toxins. Insects form the bulk of the diet of most birds' even insectivorous ones.

My aim is always to create gardens that are sanctuaries – both for people and small creatures. As you arrive home after a day at work, I want your heart to lift in delight as you see the garden. When you are inside the house, I want you to be able to watch sunbirds probing gorgeous flowers right outside your window or enjoy tiny Cape white-eyes searching a shrub for insect snacks. This is easily achieved if you follow some pointers. Choose your "Invitation" trees and then avoid planting them alone in the middle of the lawn – not many birds will venture across large open spaces thus exposing themselves to predators. Link your trees to the rest of the garden with beds of shrubs and other plantings. Create green corridors where you can. Continuous planting on the perimeter (i.e., a green corridor) will allow creatures to move around safely.

This article shows the transformation of the aforementioned garden in progress, and, while it will take some time to settle, the change will be profound and far-reaching. The owner is already thrilled with the increase in visiting bird.

The entrance garden has areas of full shade, part shade, and full sun. Three *Indigofera jucunda* were planted and while they are pretty – they are in isolation from the rest of the garden – there is no link to the remainder. The underplanting was made up purely of

Crassula multicava. On the sunny side, Lavender bushes flanked exotic *Murraya exotica* and Daylilies. A pretty water feature was surrounded by a sea of green tropical plants - looking for all the world like a plastic arrangement. Our solution was a radical one - everything had to go, and we implemented a "scorched earth" policy. It must be said that the owner is a brave person! The result is charming even in its infant stages.

In the bed of original *Indigofera*, we planted a single *Peddiea africana*. The Green-flower tree does well in shade with fruit for birds and sweetly scented flowers at night. Behind it are two species of Sunbird bush – *Metarungia longistrobis* and *M. pubinervia*. Apricot and red flowers respectively in autumn means sunbirds and even Cape white-eyes will visit this bed set so close to the house. Spring will usher in a shower of orange flowers with the single *Burchellia bubalina* (Wild pomegranate). Pride of place in the front of the bed are the shade aloes – *Aloe pruinosa* and *Aloe dyeri*. Both are low growing and flower pale pink and pale red in February and March respectively. More sunbirds to watch from the lounge. The underplanting consists of *Bulbine natalensis*, *Plectranthus* "Mona Lavender" and *Pelargonium tongaense*. The latter is the only *Pelargonium* that thrives in semi-shade, bearing lovely brick red flowers on and off through the year. *Chlorophytum (Anthericum) saundersiae*, so beloved of bees and Bronze Mannikins, fill in the gaps between the shrubs at the back.

The water feature has been transformed with plantings of *Clivia miniata*, *Crocasmia aurea*, and masses of *Haemanthus albiflos*. This means orange Clivia blooms in spring, the orange flames of Falling Stars (*Crocasmia*) in autumn and white paintbrushes of *Haemanthus* in June. The shiny red seeds of the *Clivia* and *Haemanthus* will attract birds and bring additional colour to this previously monotone sterile setting.

Moving to the sunny side – the "invitation" tree is *Acacia karroo*. This beauty flushes with scented yellow fluffy balls several times during summer – it will be the first thing one sees as one arrives at the house. It will also be a magnet for insects – bees and butterflies in particular. We replaced the uniformly planted hedge of *Freylinia* with a diverse selection of shrubs. *Portulacaria afra*, *Hypericum*, *Syncolostemon densiflorus*, *Hoslundia opposita* and *Syncolostemon obermeyerii*. This unconventional choice will form a rambling, informal flowering screen which will need occasional pruning to keep in check. Unlike the previous planting of *Freylinia tropica* – which the gardener pruned weekly to keep its formal shape.

The bed at the front door was tricky – some hot sun and some shade. A corner was filled with *Metarungia pubinervia* – slender and not too bushy (red flowers on the stem in autumn). *Mitrostigma axillare* (Small false loquat) will thrive here giving both fruit and scent. The underplanting from the opposite shady side was repeated. This knits the whole look together, so there is no "fruit salad" effect.

The front garden proved to be a lot of fun. A pond and three-tier fountain were first in. People tend to shy away from ponds and water features because of worries about maintenance. This omission deprives the gardener of a great pleasure. When correctly planted, ponds maintain themselves with crystal clear water. I like to use baskets filled with dwarf papyrus and Arum lilies. All *Cyperus* species lap up the nitrates in the water. All that is required is to clear the vegetation out once a year or so. Frogs will have a sanctuary, tilapia will eat any mosquito larvae, the Hamerkop will visit (as he does in my garden) and the grey heron may be a silent visitor in an early morning. Painted reed frogs cling to the stems of the Arum lilies which thrive in water as long as their heads are in the sun.

Most important with any water for birds is to provide a tall background perch and hiding place. A Paperbark acacia (*Acacia sieberiana*) and the smaller *A. davyii* will provide this in time. *Greyia sutherlandii* (Natal bottlebrush) will be splendid in late winter with burnished leaves and nectar filled red brushes. The aloes were grouped together on a "koppie" we created and of course, we added many more so during winter the garden will boast a procession of stunning blooms.

Aloe spicata is one of my favourites with its sweet black nectar. Its flower spikes open by degrees up the flower spike, and this lengthens the length of time creatures have to sip the nectar. This is Nature's way of ensuring pollination

Leonotis leonurus and *L. intermedia* hug the underside of *Grewia occidentalis* – the Crossberry is another "invitation" tree. The lilac flowers are present most of the summer, and the foliage is host to 19 moths and 2 butterflies. Yellow fruit follows – much enjoyed by small birds. We planted three *Xylothea kraussiana* – the African Dog Rose so beloved of the Garden Acraea butterfly. The hairy caterpillars which feast on their leaves are relished by cuckoos. This whole cycle takes place in your garden ... what a privilege. Interestingly, specimens which are decimated by the caterpillars in their youth usually recover and grow quicker and stronger than those *Xylothea* which escape the attention of the prickly little worms.

Large parts of the garden are planted as a meadow with all the special grassland species we have available to us now. *Dierama latifolium*, *Eucomis autumnalis*, *Helichrysum splendidum*, *Hypoxis hemerocallidea*, *Gerbera ambigua*, *Gladiolus dalenii*, *Merwillia plumbea* (= *Scilla natalensis*) - all are present. *Aloe cooperi* and *Aloe maculata* supply flowers in summer and winter respectively. *Aloe arborescens* is in the background together with *Aloe tenuior*. The Krantz aloe supports the scandant stems of *A. tenuior* (Kraal Aloe) which flower in summer. *Erythrina humeana* (Dwarf Coral Tree) peers from several grassy clumps providing brilliant splashes of red throughout summer. We brought in a very large *Erythrina*

lystemon to shade the deck. A favourite of the owner is *Hoslundia opposita* – Dark-capped bulbuls forage continuously in this shrub, in search of the little orange balloon-like fruit. The grasses are present too and are important for seed-eating birds. Over the years, I have learned not to plant them too closely. *Aristida junciformis* is wonderful with its blonde fluffy seed heads but tends to sprawl over neighbouring plants so be sure to use them judiciously. Life in their natural veld is much harsher than the benevolent conditions of a garden where they can become too boisterous. This was the case with *Setaria sphacelata* (Golden Bristle Grass) – it is one of my favourites as birds love it so – but it became rambunctious in this garden and swallowed up some of its neighbours. We left just one clump which will have to be managed. *Melinis nerviglumis* brings red fluffy seed heads which turn silver. *Cymbopogon validus* or Turpentine grass is handsome with grey-green foliage.

Although this garden has a huge amount of diversity, the choices were carefully considered. Certain plants are bullies and can overrun others - in this way the structure of a garden is quickly lost. Therefore, you will see no *Barleria* spp. or even *Asystasia* in any small garden I do – their tendency is to run amok and cause the gardener untold maintenance issues. Do not write them off however as they are wonderful plants for insects – in the right situation.

The side garden once again was a mono planting of large blue *Agapanthus* and *Freylinia tropica*. Rather than remove the entire hedge and expose the owner to the golf course, we took out every fifth *Freylinia* and replaced it with more wildlife friendly selections. The fairly narrow area now links the entrance garden to the back – it is a little woodland filled with slender trees and low-growing underplanting of *Anthericum saundersiae* with surprises of *Scadoxus puniceus* – bright red pincushion flowers in spring will delight the owner. *Deinbollia oblongifolia* (Dune Soapberry) is the “best butterfly tree in the subtropics” to quote that doyen of all things indigenous - David Johnson. We planted five. The shady walls will be softened by *Psychotria capensis* (Black Bird-berry) and *Aloe pluridens* (French Aloe) as they grow. The common name of the latter Aloe is a strange one – this plant is our very own, endemic to the east coast – nothing French about it!

Can you see how this garden will be an oasis for creatures, providing a continuous source of food and shelter and at the same time bringing colour and interest year-round?