

Echoes of Namibia in this tiny space:

It's 9 o'clock on a winter morning, and we exit the shaded entrance path into a soft, slanting light from a cloudless sky. Although the low sun casts shadows around each plant and rock most of the landscape is wrapped in a warm glow. The sun's rays fire up the flowering tips of a wild grass clump, and it takes a fraction of a moment to sink in; we're standing on the stone floor of a desert landscape. In Hillcrest.

The client's brief to landscaper Jenny Dean was simple; change a tiny corner of their tiny Hillcrest estate garden to resemble a snapshot of their Namibian break – red-tinged boulders to resemble a rock wall, gravel to echo stony ground, and a smattering of succulents and grasses in between.

The crucial aspect was getting the plant palette right; a few thousand km away in another time zone, the arid landscape is the inverse of this lush summer-rainfall garden. Biome-wise, it's Desert meets Mistbelt Grassland!

"It was an interesting challenge", Jenny says. "We had to take into account that Hillcrest is misty and wet and doesn't lend itself naturally to a desert garden. So, we chose the hottest sunniest spot and added rocks to echo the desert cliffs the client loves so much (although on a tiny scale). We planted *Aloe ferox* for height and form, and various medium-sized to smaller aloes are dotted throughout the gravel surface interspersed with interesting succulents. Some special ones like *Faucaria* sp. (Tiger's Jaws) huddle next to a rock just like they do in the desert. Playful cement meerkats grace the picture, and a wonderful fire pit encourages evenings outside under the stars". "The result", she says, "is a charming miniature desert scene".

Design pointers:

Bold, architectural forms, sparse vegetation, and wide open spaces define desert landscapes. Echo these characteristics with boulders that stack together to form low, loosely structured outcrops with an assortment of rock and pebbles arranged across the rest of the ground. And don't over-plant or you will lose the important open aspect, and the design will resemble a flower bed. Position boulders in groups and concentrate plant groups close by. In arid regions plants use the rocks to help them survive the harsh landscape; larger stones provide some shade through the day, as well as life-giving moisture from dew and the odd rainfall that pool at their base. And in the heat of summer, the boulders help to keep plant roots cool. So too will they aid the plants in your garden. Add the odd stand-alone rock to give a natural effect of a small satellite breaking away from the mother ship.

The desert floor:

The varied sandstone and brown tones of Duzi gravel reflect the desert floor with rocks, a few large boulders, and small stones adding the burnished reds. Gravel is a fluid material that flows easily around solid structures like this paved patio, and the resulting corners lend themselves to small, artful arrangements like this diminutive, Guinea-fowl Aloe, *Aristaloe aristata* (= *Aloe aristata*) around a section of old wood, a perfect fit just off the entrance path. *A. aristata* is widespread through the Eastern Cape, Free State, KwaZulu-Natal, and Northern Cape.

Laying the gravel floor:

To keep the gravel clean lay down a barrier of weed guard to separate it from the underlying soil. A thick layer is best, about 7 – 10 cm deep to prevent any bald spots opening up where you walk. Keep in mind too, that a cover of gravel absorbs the sun's heat through the day, increasing the temperature of both the

surrounding air and the soil beneath it. As will the outer rock surfaces and succulent species should cope well in these conditions, especially during mid-summer. At night, the stones release heat back into the surrounding air, of great benefit in gardens that experience frost. Install an edging where the gravel butts up against a flower bed or lawn to prevent stones bleeding into the soil or onto the grass where they could damage the mower.

Planting in gravel: You will need to dig out some soil depending on the size of the rootball. Place a piece of plastic/ cloth on which to deposit the excavated soil. Cut a cross in the barrier fabric big enough to fit the rootball, return just enough of the soil to level the ground, insert the plant, and replace the weed guard and stones.

Desert plants:

Acacias and *Euphorbias* are common in the Namib Desert and Nama Karoo. Typical species like *Vachellia (Acacia) erioloba* and *V. karroo* are too large for this garden but Jenny's choice of feature tree, *Senegalia (Acacia) nigrescens*, fits well with the theme.

"I used a root bound stunted specimen, so it will hopefully stay smallish," Jenny explains. The tree has been cleverly planted just in front of a sizable, weather-beaten stump, and the initial impression is of an old and stunted tree trunk until you catch sight of the actual stem, slim and gold-brown with a beautiful flaking bark. A short-stemmed *Aloe ferox*, squeezed between a rough, flat rock and the slender trunk of a young cabbage tree, supports a freshly developing candelabra. *Cussonia zuluensis* is the smallest of the Cabbage tree family; slim, with a mop head of leaves so typical of the genus, it fits into tight spaces and provides the sparse foliage look required. A versatile plant, it is most commonly found in thick dry scrub or bush clumps, as well as in evergreen forests.

Euphorbia trigona is a West and Central African species, but a favourite of the client hence its use here, but we have an extensive choice of local species to suit most garden sizes and geography. Take care with *Euphorbias* though, as all contain a milky latex, poisonous in most species, and make sure to keep them far enough away from the path as many carry needle-sharp thorns or spines.

I'm enamoured with the diminutive individuals splashed across the stony ground looks as if grown from seed casually dropped by passing animals. Many of the succulents used here do occur in the arid and semi-arid areas, but thrive in full sun areas around the country; *Cotydelon orbiculata*, *Crassula capitella*, *Gasterias*, *Haworthia*, and *Delosperma*.

Light and shadows will change seasonally. Today, grey-green aloe leaves are russet and red indicating the arrival of a dry winter, and *Crassula capitella* stems droop with partially opened buds. *Delosperma rogersii* forms small neat swells of emerald-green. Yellow flowers remain closed at this hour and will open as the heat rises and the light brightens. Round emerald-green paddle-like leaves of the *Cotydelon* gleam in this light, stunning even without their red/orange flowering bells.

It is a garden that draws you in as you carefully pick your way around the boulders and aged wood meticulously arranged across the ground. And each season brings another delight both large and small. You'll need to get close to the ground to take in the full beauty of the intriguing leaf and spine shapes of the Tiger's Jaws; the orange/ yellow flowers are surprisingly large, with quite beautiful centres. "This tiny plant is from the Eastern Cape", explains Jenny, "growing amongst rocks in shallow soil in the shade of xerophytic shrubs. I have noticed they prefer a little shade actually, as long as it's dry". *Aloe ferox* racemes, on the other hand, stand tall for all to see and require no bended knee!

The design could prove to be a temporary mistbelt desert, as the Lavender trees further along the fenceline mature to shade much of the afternoon sun in later years. But, for the moment, the hot sun and stone-filled ground bring home to Jenny's clients just a tiny slice of their favourite Namibian holiday destination.

PLANT PALETTE

- *Delosperma rogersii* - Mountain Vygie
- *Euphorbia species* - Spurges
- *Cotyledon orbiculata* - Pig's Ear
- *Crassula capitella* - Red Flames (winter colour)
- *Aloe ferox* - Bitter Aloe/ Cape Aloe
- *Acacia nigrescens* - Knob-thorn
- *Faucaria species* - Tiger's Jaw
- *Aloe aristata* plus a variety of small aloe species
- Various spotted Aloe species
- *Leucospermum species* - Pincushion
- *Cussonia zuluensis* - Zulu Cabbage Tree
- *Aristida junciformis* - nGongoni
- *Melinis nerviglumis* - Bristle-leaved Red Top

WHICH ACACIA GOES WHERE - *Vachellia*/ *Senegalia*

The new nomenclature puts all thorn-trees with straight spines and capitate (pompon-like) inflorescences are now all in the genus *Vachellia*.

- *V. karroo* - Sweet-thorn
- *V. xanthophloea* - Fever Tree
- *V. sieberiana* - Paper-bark

Those with hooked spines and spicate (spike-like) inflorescences into the genus *Senegalia*.

- *S. nigrescens*
- *S. burkei*
- *S. mellifera*