

In brief

WHAT Botanic Garden

WHERE Cape Town, South Africa

SIZE 91 acres of gardens within 1,300 acres of parkland and forest.

SOIL Sandy loam with clay in places; well-drained, acid and very deep.

CONDITIONS Mediterranean-type climate, with regular rain in winter and spring.

Summer average maximum temperature 25°C, winter daily average minimum 8.5°C.

FEATURES Huge collection of native South African species, planted in a spectacular location

African Eden

This lush paradise on the slopes of Table Mountain is a showcase for the extraordinarily rich flora of one country – South Africa

WORDS JOHN HOYLAND PHOTOGRAPHS CLAIRE TAKACS

South African flora is incredibly rich and includes tall Kosi palms (*Raphia australis*), which are said to have the world's longest leaves – up to 18m long.



Yellow *Ursinia cakilefolia* flower beneath a paperbark thorn (*Acacia sieberiana* var. *woodii*). Beyond lies a blue belt of the shrub *Selago canescens*.



The true blue daisy (*Felicia heterophylla*) is an annual daisy from the Western Cape.

ABOVE The forest lily (*Veltheimia bracteata*) can be grown in the UK, provided it has plenty of sunshine in a cool greenhouse.



According to a South African friend, after God had finished distributing plants around the world he found more seeds at the bottom of his pocket. These he sprinkled on South Africa. There are more prosaic botanical and evolutionary reasons to explain the huge diversity of the country's flora. I am happy with the poetry of my friend's explanation.

The range of the country's plant life is astonishing: nearly half of the world's succulents and more than 22,000 indigenous species. The place to visit to get a sense of the variety and the beauty of all these plants is the Kirstenbosch National Botanic Garden in Cape Town. Kirstenbosch focuses on the flora of the Cape area but grows plants from all the regions and habitats of South Africa.

On a tour of the garden a guide told me that he had heard of Kew Gardens and the Brooklyn Botanic. "They must be wonderful places: all those plants from all over the world." And then the whispered response to my smug smile: "But look how beautiful all this is. All of it. This is all ours. This is all South African."

Kirstenbosch was the first botanic garden in the world to be dedicated to a country's indigenous species. It was a far-sighted government in 1913 that gave the estate of Kirstenbosch, in the shadow of Cape Town's Table Mountain, to establish a botanic garden for the study, preservation and promotion of South African plants. The estate had belonged to the colonialist Cecil Rhodes, who had wanted to preserve the natural state of the mountainside.

Colonial roots

The few non-indigenous plants in the garden date from this period. Rhodes planted an avenue of camphor trees (*Cinnamomum camphora*) imported from Hong Kong. He added cork oaks, figs and trees from throughout the British Empire in homage to the revered Queen-Empress. Victoria never visited and the Empire is long gone, but the camphor trees are still there, broad-trunked and muscular, providing cool shade to the garden's visitors.

The first major plant group to be planted in the

Places to visit nearby

Along with eight other botanic gardens, Kirstenbosch is part of the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI). There are three other SANBI gardens within a few hours' drive of Cape Town.

THE HAROLD PORTER NATIONAL BOTANIC GARDEN
A 25-acre garden in the middle of 470 acres of protected 'fynbos' (bush), full of typical Cape flora such as proteas, ericas and restios.

THE KAROO DESERT NATIONAL BOTANIC GARDEN
75 miles from Cape Town and home to succulents, annuals and trees that are adapted to the harsh conditions of the desert.

THE HANTAM NATIONAL BOTANIC GARDEN
A former sheep farm, which has one of the highest concentrations of bulbous plants in the world. The time to visit to see spectacular displays is in early spring or in the autumn.

botanic garden

The tree aloe (*Aloe barberae*) is a striking sculptural tree with a rounded crown and rose-pink flowers in winter (May to June in South Africa). It grows wild in the eastern regions of the country.



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▷ garden was a collection of cycads. These are ancient plants that at Kirstenbosch are planted in a dell, shaded by hollies and yellowwood trees. The cycads at Kirstenbosch are mainly from the genus *Encephalartos* and have been around for more than 250 million years, far longer than homo-sapiens. There is a quiet, other-worldly atmosphere in the cycad grove that makes you feel the majesty and longevity of these plants compared with the transience of mere mortals.

Areas of cool shade alternate with open, sunny lawns and beds of riotous colour. There are meadows of annuals, an *Erica* garden, pelargonium collections and, of course, mass plantings of proteas. Most of the country's 360 species of *Protea* are grown. The large silvery-pink flower of the king protea (*P. cynaroides*) is South Africa's national flower. Protea flowers are often magnificently over-the-top and would be out of place in a British herbaceous border but here, with the emerald flash of sunbirds darting about them, they are a wonderful sight.

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For future generations

The unseen face of Kirstenbosch is the scientific and conservation work that it does to study and protect the country's flora. Part of its education programme can be seen in the garden with displays of useful plants and information about dealing with the dangers posed by plants from other countries (the alarmingly named Aliens Eradication Project). Reminders to conserve natural resources, in particular water, are everywhere. Even the urinals at Kirstenbosch use a waterless system far more advanced than anything I've seen in Britain.

Before the post-apartheid development of tourism to South Africa, Kirstenbosch was known to most British gardeners only by its annual wondrous displays at the Chelsea Flower Show. This was during the time of a UN-sanctioned cultural, academic and scientific boycott of South Africa. Somehow, with the assistance of the ▷

1 *Erica discolor* is one of around 770 species of *Erica* that occur in southern Africa. This species grows on the lower mountain slopes and coast of the southwestern and southern Cape.

2 Tree fuchsias (*Halleria lucida*) and African hollies (*Ilex mitis*) shade tree ferns (*Cyathea dregei* and *Dicksonia antarctica*) in The Dell, whose natural spring provides water all year round.

3 Grand duchess sorrel (*Oxalis purpurea*) grows in several of the lawns.

4 Featherhead (*Phyllica pubescens*) is a fynbos shrub with hairy leaves and floral bracts; it makes a great cut flower.

5 The strangler fig (*Ficus craterostoma*) is a majestic tree with massive, buttressed trunk. Its dangling aerial roots can wrap themselves around the original trunk, eventually killing it.

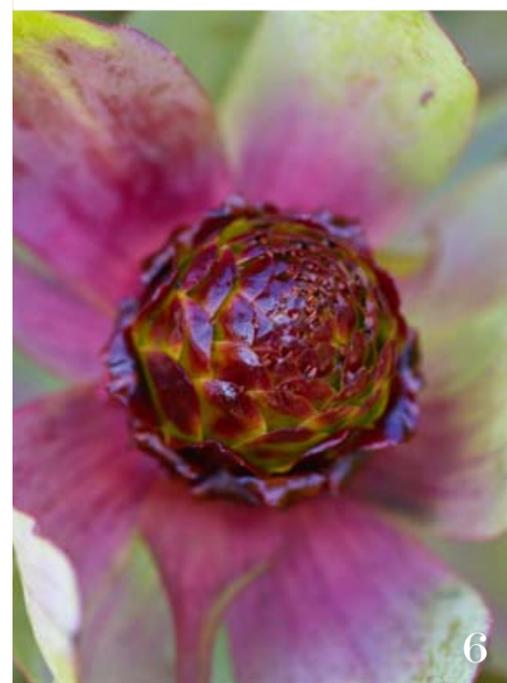
6 *Leucadendron tinctum* is a member of the protea family whose common name, spicy conebush, comes from the pleasant scent of its flowers. In this genus the male and female flowers are borne on separate plants; the plant pictured is the maturing female flower.

7 Broad pathways wind through the garden beneath an elegant red mahogany tree (*Khaya anthotheca*).

8 Mossel Bay pincushion (*Leucospermum praecox*) is under threat as farmers plough up wild habitats in its native region between Albertinia and Mossel Bay.

9 Bushveld candelabra euphorbia (*E. cooperi*), from KwaZulu-Natal, Swaziland and Limpopo, is a spiny, succulent tree up to 7m tall with toxic milky latex that is used as a fish poison.

10 The annual parachute daisy (*Ursinia anthemoides*) has masses of sunny blooms above delicate, lacy foliage.





Melianthus major

South African plants to grow in British gardens

Hardy species that can bring a touch of the exotic to your garden

MELIANTHUS MAJOR

An imposing plant with glaucous, serrated leaves and, occasionally, spikes of chocolate-brown flowers about 2m tall. It will usually be cut to the ground by frosts but will re-shoot from the crown.



Zaluzianskya ovata

ZALUZIANSKYA OVATA

A gem of a plant with deep-red buds that open to glistening-white flowers as the day progresses. The flowers have a strong, spicy scent in the evening. A compact, carpeting plant that also grows well in pots, as long as they are kept well-watered during the summer.



Gladiolus tristis

GLADIOLUS TRISTIS

Needs a warm situation that is dry during the winter, but it's worth the effort. The pale creamy-yellow flowers are deliciously scented and when grown in the right conditions, the corm soon multiplies.



Pelargonium sidoides

PELARGONIUM SIDOIDES

Has felted grey foliage and sprays of dark flowers, notably lighter in cultivation. In most areas it will need winter protection but can survive outdoors in central London and other mild areas of the country. Extracts from the roots are marketed in Britain as a traditional African cold remedy.



Zantedeschia aethiopica

ZANTEDESCHIA AETHIOPICA

The arum lily seems to grow everywhere in South Africa, and is easy to grow in British gardens. To flower well it needs rich soil that does not dry out during the summer.

▷ RHS, Kirstenbosch managed to avoid the anti-apartheid radar and give gardeners a glimpse of the eco-systems and plant habitats of the country. It was one of the few South African institutions that presented a positive image of the country on an international stage. As such it was lavishly funded by the apartheid government.

Governments' priorities change and the gardens are now largely self-financing, with support from charitable institutions and commercial ventures. This is an extraordinary achievement by the garden's management. The fact that they have been able to do this while at the same time developing their scientific and educational work is remarkable.

Born at the height of colonial enthusiasm and thriving through the country's darkest period, Kirstenbosch is now flourishing with the vitality and hope that marks the new South Africa. The garden is more, though, than a reflection of its country's history. Taking a pause to lie on the lawn, tired by travelling, gazing across the garden to the distant city and overwhelmed by the garden's flora and fauna it is the splendour of the plants and the absolute beauty of the place that moves you. It really is a garden worth crossing the world to see. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Kirstenbosch National Botanic Garden, Rhodes Drive, Newlands, Cape Town, South Africa.

TEL +27 21 799 8899, www.sanbi.org

OPEN daily; September to March, 8am to 7pm;

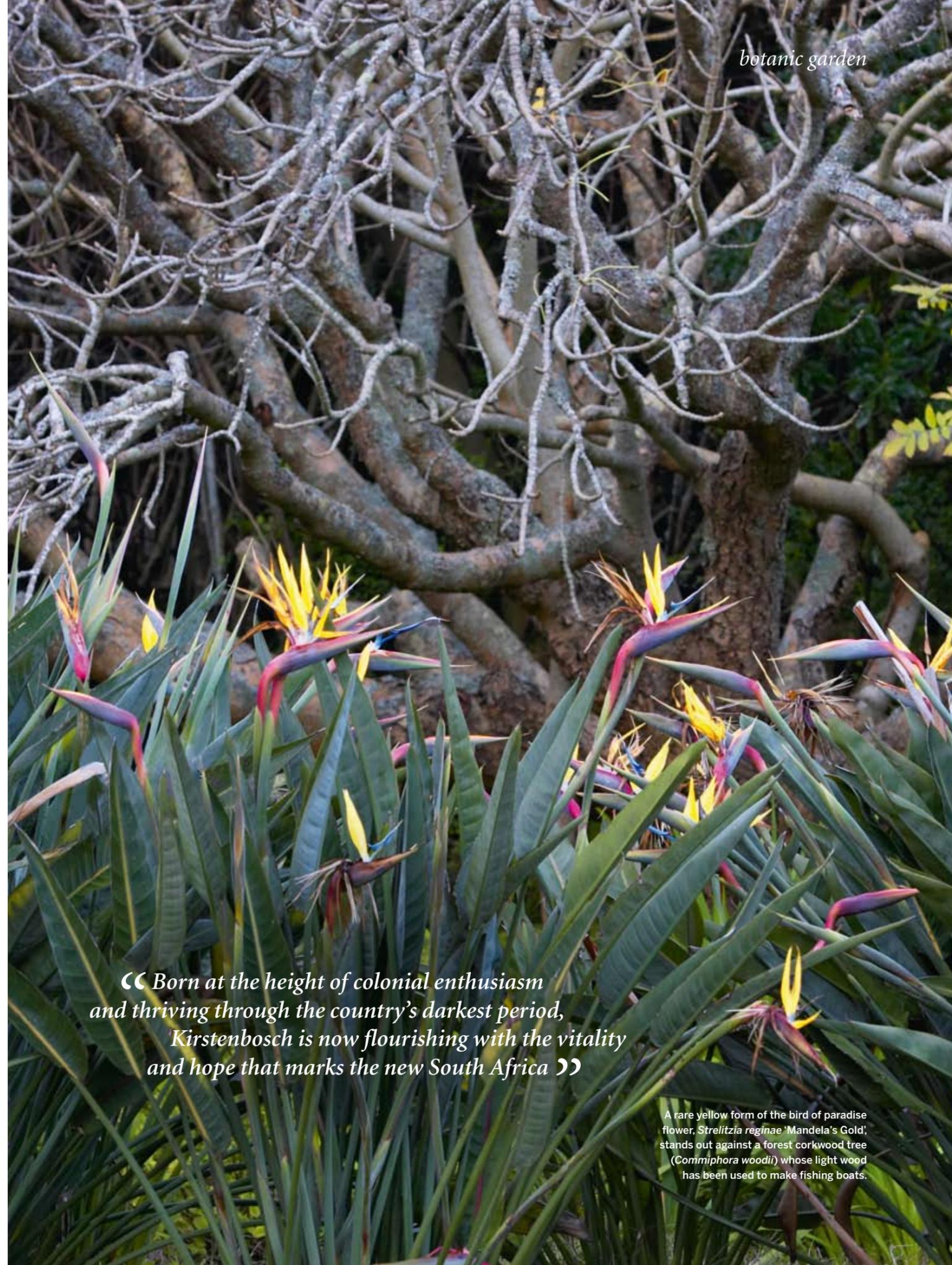
April to August, 8am to 6pm.

GUIDES John Hoyland's botanical guide in South Africa was

Karin Frehse, tel +27 21 557 7308, karinef@telkomsa.net

• Visit Kirstenbosch by joining our Plants and Gardens of South Africa holiday – turn to page 8 for details.

BBC Monty Don visits Kirstenbosch in the BBC TV series *Around The World In 80 Gardens*, which is now available on DVD at the reduced price of £16.50 (RRP £24.50), plus p&p. Tel 0844 848 9799 (charged at the national rate), www.bbcshop.com



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A rare yellow form of the bird of paradise flower, *Strelitzia reginae* 'Mandela's Gold', stands out against a forest corkwood tree (*Commiphora woodii*) whose light wood has been used to make fishing boats.