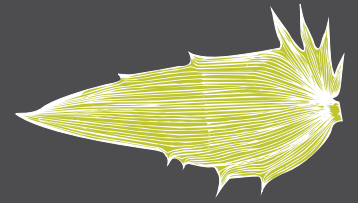


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N°003
2014



Cultivating People and Plants

| A Presentation of Plants

| For the Birds

| Code Mode

| Curation Control

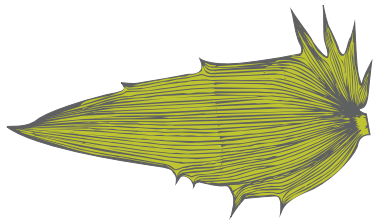
| Scrounging for Succulents

| Music at the Lake

A Publication of the Durban Botanic Gardens Trust



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A Message from the Curator

Martin Clement - Curator: Durban Botanic Gardens



Photograph by Clinton Friedman

Awaiting text

A Chairman's View

Ivor Daniel – Chairman: Durban Botanic Gardens Trust



Photograph by Clinton Friedman

Awaiting text

Unwanted Guests: the Guinea-hen weed, *Petiveria alliacea* in the Durban Botanic Gardens

Petiveria alliacea was first recorded in South Africa in the Durban Botanic Gardens in KwaZulu-Natal by the then curator of the Gardens and Natal Herbarium, John Medley Wood, in 1883. An herbaceous perennial belonging to the family Phytolaccaceae, *Petiveria* found its way to Natal from where it naturally occurs in the southern United States, Latin America and the Caribbean. It was subsequently recorded in 1932 and 1979/1980 when specimens were taken from cultivated collections in both the Gardens and adjoining Herbarium. In 2004, *Petiveria* was described as a cultivated garden ornamental in South Africa. Notably, the first collection of *Petiveria* from non-cultivated specimens in South Africa was made in 1989 by Alfred Ngwenya, a member of the KwaZulu-Natal Herbarium, on the herbarium grounds where it was then common, despite its then status as a no-longer-cultivated subject. While *Petiveria* has not yet been recorded as an uncultivated taxon in gardens or natural areas, over 1300 individual plants were recorded in 2011/2012 in the Gardens and Herbarium, and their immediate surrounds; upon discovery, these plants were removed.



The persistence of these plants as self-sustaining populations over the last decade means that they may now be considered naturalised, and *Petiveria* was recorded as naturalised in South Africa in 2013, corroborating similar instances of naturalisation for this species from forest edges and disturbed sites in India, Nigeria and Benin.

The tale of *Petiveria* is revealing for the breadth of its application, because the number of introduced plant taxa in South Africa is estimated at 750 exotic tree, and 8000 non-native herbaceous species, many of which could naturalise. It is believed that, even in the absence of new introductions, the number of biological invasions in South Africa will increase as introduced species naturalise in the future, and ultimately become invasive. Indeed, the period separating Wood's 1883 record and the present day i.e. the time from introduction to naturalisation, is 130 years, a figure similar to Australian estimates of the same parameter, albeit for woody perennials. *Petiveria alliacea* is currently categorised as a 'species-under-surveillance', and further study has been recommended to assess whether it should be brought within the ambit of invasive species legislation and regulation.



Photograph by M Cheek

Petiveria alliacea, the behaviour of which provides an instructive and cautionary tale with broad relevance for how we view exotic plant species

The distribution of naturalised *Petiveria alliacea* in the Durban Botanic Gardens, KwaZulu-Natal Herbarium and their immediate surrounds in 2011/2012

A presentation of plants¹

The CIRCA gallery in Johannesburg recently exhibited part of a series of 87 photographs of indigenous plants entitled *Botanical Portraits Unearthed*, taken by sculptor-photographer Russell Scott between 2008 and 2013. Startling in their vividness, these singular images invite a novel and important encounter with their subjects.

The origins of Scott's offering are fascinating. After studying fine art, he made models for the advertising industry, where he was drawn to the "theatrics and dramatic impacts of lighting and portraiture." A growing interest in photography was matched by his wife, Philippa Hobbs's interest in plants, setting the stage for a collaboration of their passions.

Scott is effusive about her botanical and horticultural skill. Collected specimens are replanted in their garden, where they are identified and nurtured by Philippa until the time is right for them to be excavated and moved to the studio for photographing, after which they are carefully repatriated to the earth. Most of the plants are from the Highveld – purchased from downtown Johannesburg's Faraday muthi market, rescued from the path of bulldozers or chanced upon in ditches and building sites. According to Scott, Philippa's uncanny ability to locate plants, and her talent in curating their collection is crucial in creating the photographic opportunities he requires.

Employing a device which may be termed botanical portraiture, Scott has created essential and acontextual images of arresting luminosity. Drawing on his experience as a sculptor, he positions his subjects in space as if orienting a sculpture, using lighting to create dimensionality, and to dramatically reveal colour, texture and form. Interestingly, he is further informed by his former career as an aircraft technician, and his design work in CAD, in integrating spatial, mechanical and sculptural considerations. His aim being to capture the plant's "unique personality", the idealised botanical specimen is eschewed in favour of "All things counter, original, spare"² and floral parts are deemed no less defining than "roots, tubers and stems in suggesting the character of the subject."



Photograph by Russell Scott, all rights reserved ©



Photograph by Russell Scott, all rights reserved ©



Photograph by Russell Scott, all rights reserved ©



Photograph by Russell Scott, all rights reserved ©



Photograph by Russell Scott, all rights reserved ©

1. The title is drawn from the essay, *A presentation of whales*, by Barry Lopez
2. From the poem, *Pied Beauty*, by Gerard Manley Hopkins



Photograph by Russell Scott, all rights reserved ©



Photograph by Russell Scott, all rights reserved ©



Photograph by Russell Scott, all rights reserved ©

To accentuate this personality, the subject's isolation from its environment is total; taken into Scott's studio, it is suspended, still-hung in light, shadow and space, in which the plant is rendered resplendent *in-and-of-itself*.

This *sufficiency-unto-itself* is a philosophical orientation of deep affection and respect; and – paradoxically – is suggested in Scott's desire "not to intrude", and his wish for the "plants to be happy" with his depiction. For this reason, post-shoot manipulation of the images is not entertained, other than to enhance detail, or remove the support rig.

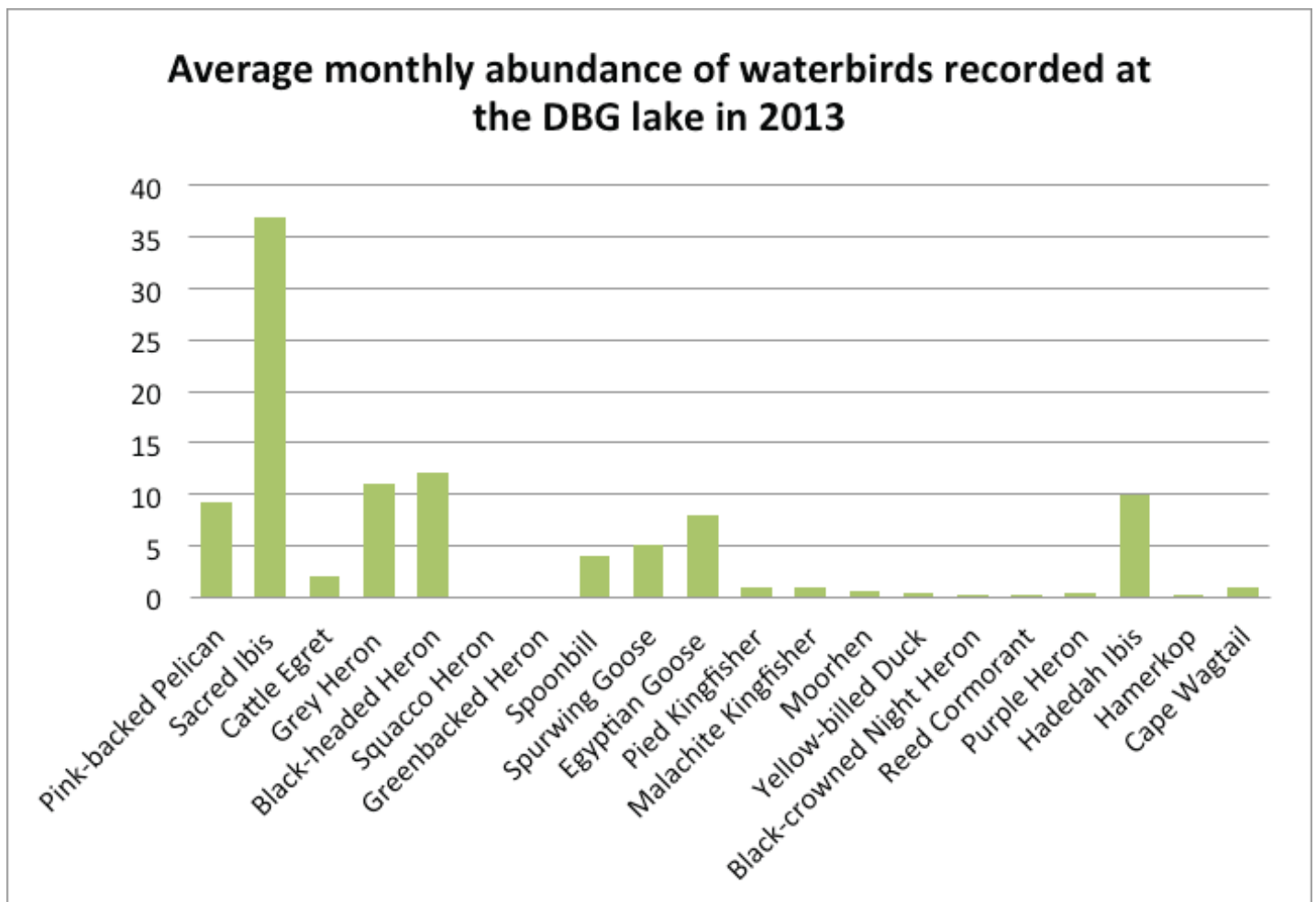
Significantly, because the subject is untethered from all that gives it context, and because the viewer's involvement with the image is so direct, he/she is confronted by an innate and intrinsic essence, and the opportunity to respond to *that alone*. In this intimation of the Phenomenologist's return "to the things themselves", one is offered the possibility of an unmediated participation, transcending the classifications and concerns of formal botany. Indeed, such is their immediacy, that Scott's astonishing images beg Krishnamurti's burning question: "what happens when we do not name?" – what treasure lies hidden beyond concepts, in the *is-ness* or *such-ness* of the world?

Scott sees the next conceptual development in his craft as a response to the more challenging natural environments of his subjects, and the reach and indivisibility of the plant-environment continuum. Scott admits that the learning curve on this *in-situ*, ecological approach will be steep. But he is now drawn to move on from depictions which, in his view, are "conceptually undemanding to the trained fine artist."

As plant lovers, we view our subjects always through the lens of our concepts and our labels. *Botanical Portraits Unearthed* has unearthed an invitation to desist from this habit, and to see what happens when we do.

...for the birds – 2013

The Durban Botanic Gardens remains a needed component of Durban’s green area footprint, and its lake and heronry are still visited by a number of birds who make use of the Garden for roosting, nesting, feeding and breeding. The Pink-backed Pelicans which began breeding at the lake in 2003 remain, and are still one of only two breeding colonies in South Africa, with between 9 and 15 chicks raised annually. The Durban Botanic Gardens lake is of particular interest bird-wise, and the Gardens have hosted monthly bird surveys of its avifauna for the last 11 years. A simple graphic of the main species frequenting the lake, and their average monthly abundance for 2013 is presented below, so that readers may familiarise themselves with the more common species resident at, or passing through the lake environs. In addition to the data presented, the numbers of juveniles, chicks and incubating birds are recorded for Pink-backed Pelicans, Sacred Ibis, Grey and Black-headed Herons and Spoonbills, all of which use the Gardens as a roosting and nesting site.



Code Mode

The Durban Botanic Gardens and the Durban Botanic Gardens Trust in partnership with Sappi recently upgraded a selection of its tree labels with Quick Response (QR) Bar-coding technology that enables visitors to scan machine-readable matrix barcodes with their smartphones.

The codes are read by applications called QR code readers that are supported by most cell phones. This optical label directs the user to web-based information about the item to which it is attached. In the case of the Gardens, the application directs visitors to <http://www.plantzafrica.com>, which offers a broad spectrum of information on the tree they have scanned. Known as mobile tagging, this technology offers a new medium in which to communicate, and targets a particular audience – younger visitors, who are adept at engaging their world via smartphone.

Echoing this sentiment, Zelda Schwalbach, Sappi Regional Communications Manager said “It is exciting for Sappi to help enable this new venture, which uses technology to broaden the exposure of more visitors to fascinating facts about the trees to be found here. We have a long-standing relationship with the Durban Botanic Gardens, and this novel tree identification project is a continuation thereof. Sappi has traditionally supported conservation and education efforts related to trees and birds, including the publication of books on these topics.”

While technology is increasingly cited as a growing barrier between people and nature, mobile tagging illustrates the simultaneous potential of technology to bridge this gap by deploying an interface which targets particular user groups.

The current phase of the project involves the labelling of over 40 indigenous trees, with QR codes as alternatives, but not replacements, for traditional tree labels. The project is being driven by the Garden’s Education portfolio and the Durban Botanic Gardens Trust in consultation with Hilton McClarty, owner of Progreen Landscape Designs, and Sappi, who have generously funded it.

Today many Botanic Gardens around the world use QR codes as part of their offering to visitors. Notably, Kew

Gardens’ QR smartphone application is networked with a database, and offers social networking, augmented reality technology, plant accession records and a GPS-driven map that allows visitors to take a self-guided tour. Manager of the Durban Botanic Gardens Trust, Kerry Phillips, said that “the creative use of technology could play a role in keeping the Gardens relevant, exciting, and at the forefront of developments in communication, interpretation and accessibility.”

The new labels are up! Many of the Garden’s larger indigenous trees have been tagged, and their indigenous status is denoted by a green strip on their labels. As the project expands, trees in different interest categories will be similarly denoted by differently coloured strips, easily visible on their labels.

So please come to the Gardens and inquire about which trees are tagged, and where you can find them. Feedback will be greatly appreciated – please contact the Garden’s Education Officer, Jody Fuchs: Jody.Fuchs@durban.gov.za.

... and don’t forget your phone!

to shoot

TRUST PROJECTS

Curation control - the Durban Botanic Gardens orchid collection

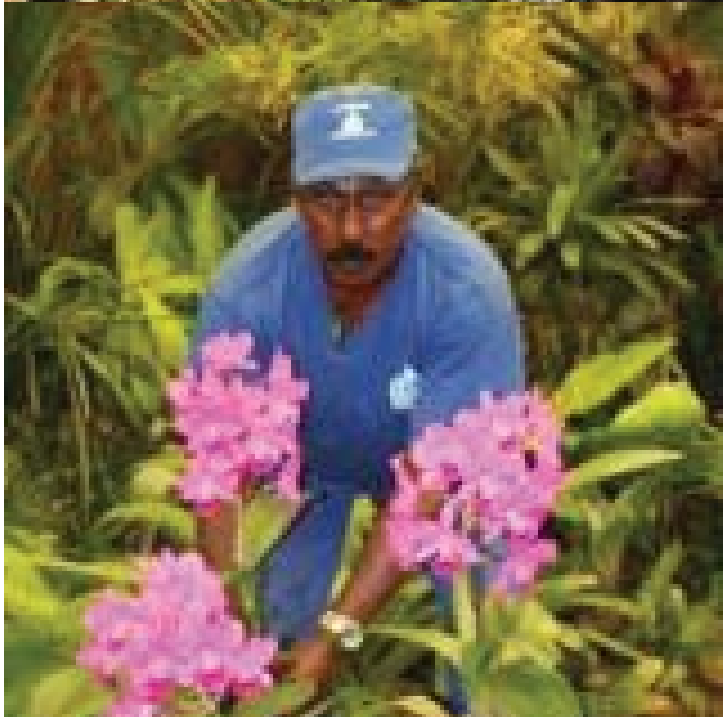
The Durban Botanic Gardens is home to the only public orchid collection in South Africa - the Ernest Thorp Orchid House is enjoyed by over 16 000 monthly visitors, and has been open to the public seven days a week since its establishment in 1962. But a collection is only as good as its curation, and the Durban Botanic Gardens Trust elected recently to upgrade the collection's palette of plants for public display, and to focus its purpose as a conservation-through-cultivation facility. Driving this project is Hendrelien Peters – an orchid grower with 30 years experience, South African Orchid Council judge since 1985 and the current editor of *Orchids South Africa*, on whose editorial board she has served for seven years. While such accolades may rightly suggest an encyclopaedic and intimate knowledge of her subject, they do not describe the effervescence, energy and enthusiasm that she lavishes on the Orchidaceae.

Briefed by the Durban Botanic Gardens Trust to optimise and re-establish the collection, Hendrelien has inventorised and added to the current stock, improved water quality, watering and feeding regimes, re-potted and introduced correct potting mixes, re-established air flow, changed the shadecloth to provide more light, moved plants to accommodate species and hybrid-specific micro-climate requirements (e.g. aeration, humidity, sun/shade balance) and re-established the collection as an ordered and actively curated asset of 6000 plants in 75 genera, including natural species and hybrids.

In addition to her shadehouse labours, Hendrelien works closely with Viloshanie Reddy, Manager of the eThekweni Parks Department's Micropropagation and Tissue Culture Unit, to bring a number of indigenous and African orchids, and some difficult-to-obtain exotic species, into cultivation. The backdrop to these efforts is the decline in indigenous South African orchids due to habitat loss and the medicinal plant trade, and the motivation to establish a conservation-significant indigenous collection. In this context, tissue culture facilities can contribute to *in vitro* conservation by propagating taxa not easily grown from seed and developing micropropagation protocols for threatened and/or medicinally important indigenous species. Additionally, micropropagation facilities can support the Gardens by providing ornamental and display plants in large numbers for the orchid house.



The Ernest Thorp Orchid house (T), a facility requiring approximately 6000 stock plants to supply the display area throughout the year; this is because many of the display specimens (MB) are seasonal, and flower only briefly



Photograph by Martin Rautenbach

Hendrelien Peters (B) doing what she loves most – photographing wild orchids in the field, and Stanley Padayachee (M) who has worked with the orchid collection for 18 years; and (T) is the orchid nursery.

In seeking the advice of Hendrelien, the Durban Botanic Gardens Trust, as with the Cycad collection, has brought the curation of the Garden’s orchids to the fore, and given the collection a trajectory and a purpose that appropriately values the plants in the Garden’s care. The fruits of this approach were recently evidenced in the participation of the Durban Botanic Gardens at the 2014 World Orchid Conference, hosted in Johannesburg in September. Held every three years, the Conference attracted nearly 500 delegates from 38 countries, including 150 judges, one of which was Hendrelien herself, who also played an active role as a conference organiser.

Assisting the Gardens with its entry, Hendrelien submitted a specimen of *Dendrobium macrophyllum* that had been in the Garden’s collection for 20 years, before blossoming under her care into a Gold Medal and First Class Certificate winner, amongst other awards conferred on it by the international judging panel. In this achievement, Hendrelien was joined by a team of Durban Botanic Gardens staff who won the Grand Champion Award in the Non Orchid Display Category for the best stand.



Photograph by

Hendrelien Peters with the Durban Botanic Garden’s prize winning specimen of *Dendrobium macrophyllum*, which was presented with four separate awards by an international panel of judges at the World Orchid Conference, recently held in Johannesburg, South Africa

The Durban Botanic Garden's Jubilee Gates – Donal P. McCracken

The announcement that the Durban Botanic Gardens is to re-erect the magnificent 1898 Jubilee Gates, also fondly known as the John Medley Wood Gates, is welcome news for those interested in the Garden's heritage.

In the 1890s one of the 'necessities' of any botanic gardens worth the name was a grand entrance. As always, the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew led the way with its Victoria Gates, but soon botanic gardens across the world were following suit. As visitors to the botanic gardens in Sri Lanka, Dublin, Hong Kong, Mauritius and Sydney will confirm, a few of these have survived but many, sadly, have been replaced by modern, utilitarian entrances. In contrast, the Durban Botanic Gardens Trust has sought to maintain the historical character of the Gardens, funding a number of restorations or upgrades of the Garden's historical artefacts (see page 13). The latest of these Trust projects is the repatriation of the Jubilee Gates, which were removed from the old main entrance in St Thomas' Road – after having stood there for 100 years – when the Gardens were fenced in the 1990s. The Trust has now removed the Jubilee Gates from storage, and is to re-position them in their rightful place.

In the case of Durban the gates consisted of a white, double wrought-iron main gate and attached iron fencing; and a similar pair were erected at Albert Park in Andrews Street in the centre of Durban. Unfortunately, the Albert Park gates were stolen for scrap-metal and are presumed to have been destroyed. The Durban Botanic Garden's annual report for 1898 noted, 'The old gate at the main entrance to the Garden has been removed, and a new wrought-iron pair of gates with about 30 yards of fencing to match has been erected in its place, an improvement which has long been urgently required'.

These gates may be seen in the context of other improvements to the Gardens made by the Durban Botanic Society, the fore-runner to the Durban Botanic Gardens Trust. These included an attractive curator's redbrick house (1890), a handsome conservatory (1898), a lily pond (1901), a purpose-built herbarium (1902), a fernery house (1905) and a pagoda tea-room (1906). These improvements cost in excess of £8000, marking a period of innovation unequalled in the gardens history to date.

Donal McCracken is a trustee of the Durban Botanic Gardens and a senior professor of History at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Scrounging for succulents – upgrading the African & Madagascan succulent garden

As part of its ongoing programme to maintain the Gardens amenity and botanical standards, the Durban Botanic Gardens Trust recently funded specialist horticulturist and landscaper James Halle to re-establish, on its historical site, the long-neglected African and Madagascan succulent garden. Because the Gardens were unable to fund new acquisitions, the project was, from the outset, improvisation-driven, and reliant on succulent stocks from the Randalls, Bridgevale and Silverglen nurseries. Additionally, the site itself was constrained by the venerable but shady presence on its northern aspect of *Jacaranda mimosifolia*, planted in 1885, and possibly the first *Jacaranda* to be planted in South Africa. James' site plan reflects his habits as a scrounger of historical artefacts,

and his view of the Gardens as a fitting repository for such objects as elements in landscaping. The dwyka tillite rocks begged from beneath a bridge confer structure on the garden's slope, and authentic geological context for the plants around them, mimicking KZN's aloe and boulder-strewn grasslands; the stones used to lay the base for a proposed bench are thought to come from old ship ballast, while the stairs linking the Succulent Garden to the Parks Department Head Office entrance are hand-dressed curbstones gleaned from the early city. Likewise, the counterpoised iron circles anchoring the garden's entrance and end-point were once part of a winning Parks Department display at the Chelsea Flower Show.

The garden is dominated by Aloes and Euphorbias, but also affords visitors specimens from the genera *Delosperma*, *Lampranthus*, *Gasteria*, *Crassula*, *Kalanchoe*, *Haworthia*, *Sansevieria* and *Bulbine*. The Madagascan flora is represented mainly by specimens of *Pachypodium* and *Alluadia*, from the dry, spiny forests of southern Madagascar. The pots, which provide a micro-environment for plants unsuited to the ground in Durban's conditions, and allow for eye-level display of smaller taxa, contain,

amongst others, specimens of *Portulacaria afra* and *Senecio medley-woodii*.

The southern African region is home to 46% of the world's succulents, and it is important that visitors are able to view some succulent taxa in settings reminiscent of their natural habitats. Through the efforts of the Durban Botanic Gardens Trust and James Halle, this is now possible.



The newly re-developed succulent garden confers a feel of the geology and natural history of the Aloe-dotted KwaZulu-Natal grasslands (L), while delicate plants are displayed in pots (R) where they can be more attentively cared for, and easily viewed



The garden is complemented by the scale and texture of its hard-structure landscaping elements - circles from Chelsea, with the threatened dune endemic, *Aloe thraskii*, in the background (L) and stairs made from hand-dressed sandstone curbs from old Durban, and suspected ballast rocks, artefacts of the city's maritime history (R)

OLD MUTUAL MUSIC AT THE LAKE A FUNDRAISING INITIATIVE OF THE DURBAN BOTANIC GARDENS TRUST WITH JOINT VENTURE PARTNER IMPI CONCERTS

"...let the music take you!" - Bandile Mngoma – Sponsorships Manager, Old Mutual

The identity of the Durban Botanic Gardens is shifting to one of an emerging forum of City, Durban Botanic Gardens Trust, and corporate and private sector participants, all of whom are drawn to the Garden's over-arching ethos and mission. This synergy is apparent in the working relationships that have grown around the Durban Botanic Gardens Trust's Old Mutual Music at the Lake Concert series, which has seen the Botanic Gardens Lake feature as a venue-of-choice for a growing outdoor music market.

As Old Mutual's Sponsorships Manager Bandile Mngoma says, "...for a company like Old Mutual that aspires to be a good corporate citizen, the Durban Botanic Gardens ticks our 'Brand Fit' boxes and speaks to our values as a company." As stated in its latest 'Do Great Things' Newsletter, Old Mutual believes that creating a better South Africa starts with uplifting its most vulnerable communities. Guided by a mutually-held mission, the Garden's new curator and the Durban Botanic Gardens Trust mirror this perspective. Both the Gardens and the Trust believe that the profession of horticulture can drive ecosystem-based adaptations to a future of socio-economic and environmental vulnerability.

Bandile, who has worked with botanic gardens countrywide for the last three years, says that Corporate Social Responsibility and Music are made for each other, especially in South Africa, where music "speaks all languages" and "weaves together the strands of our cultural diversity." But while music is a driver of social cohesion, "...not everyone is able to create a space for multi-cultural events", says Mngoma, but "the Durban Botanic Gardens has pushed boundaries in terms of what it stands for in today's South Africa, and created a multi-cultural comfort zone that is close to nature, family friendly, and a top class music venue."

This assessment is shared by Stu Berry of Impi Concerts, whose business partnership with the Durban Botanic Gardens Trust has seen Music at the Lake attendances grow exponentially over the last three years. Stuart sees this as an indication that "society is moving towards a greener living experience as a whole", and that the Gardens speaks to this.

Impi's "spend-more-to-make-more" approach has fast-tracked the trend, seeing bands including Just Jinjer, The Kickstands, Micasa, The Muffinz, Johnny Clegg and David Jenkins, Gangs of Ballet and The Durban City Orchestra play to sold out crowds, with 35 000 people attending nine shows in 2013. For Stuart, the nature-meets-music setting of the Gardens is a perfect mix – one that was captured recently when a flock of pelicans flew in as a support act for The Parlotones, nearly stealing the show! Fittingly, according to Bandile, The Parlotones are known for their regular championing of the environment, having loaned their celebrity status over the years to initiatives such as Earth Hour and Live Earth.

This convergence of venue and values, Stuart believes, has enabled Impi to expand their business and assisted the Durban Botanic Gardens Trust to bring an additional 20 000 odd people annually through the gates. Confidence in the Gardens as a venue has led to plans for the construction of a permanent on-site stage which will allow for a more dynamic and expanded programme.

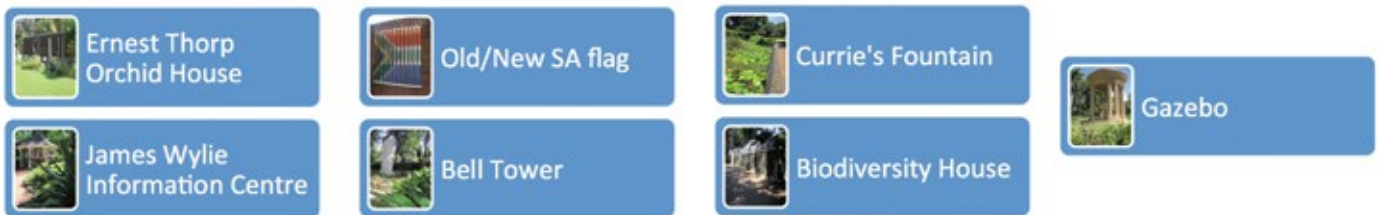
In helping to advance the Durban Botanic Gardens Trust's broad aims, the collaboration between Old Mutual, Impi and the Durban Botanic Gardens Trust is serving to change perceptions of what a botanic garden is, and can be, and to show how Africa's oldest surviving Botanic Garden can reach out to a new and necessary audience.

Images to be supplied

TRUST PROJECTS

Upgraded

A number of the Garden's stately historical landmarks were recently given a facelift. With the help of a donation of paint from Plascon, and a private contractor employed by the Durban Botanic Gardens Trust, the features shown below were re-painted. This project formed part of an ongoing commitment by the Trust to fund basic maintenance in the Gardens.



Looking after the Lake

Another Garden invasive is *Pistia stratiotes*, the water lettuce, which recently covered much of the Durban Botanic Gardens lake, reducing the lake's water quality and its habitat value for birds. This mat-forming aquatic plant was introduced to South Africa from South America as a decorative pond subject, and is now invasive in the country's rivers and dams, where it can clog irrigation equipment, reduce water flow, interfere with recreational activities and threaten indigenous aquatic organisms. The Durban Botanic Gardens Trust recently removed *Pistia* from the lake, soliciting the donation of a boat, and funding both equipment and labour costs.



Durban Botanic Gardens Trustee Margaret Cooke was instrumental in arranging a sponsor for the boat needed to clear the water lettuce from the lake. The project was facilitated by Mr. Vernon Goss, the Honorary Life President of the Point Yacht Club, who funded the boat through Riverview Manor, Choose Life High Performance Sailing and Bowman Yacht Sales. Christened 'Woodii', the boat was launched on the Pistia-covered lake with, from left to right: Mr. Vernon Goss, Jody Fuchs (Durban Botanic Gardens Education portfolio), Sibusiso Mkhwanazi (Senior Manager - Parks, Leisure and Cemeteries), Martin Clement (Curator - Durban Botanic Gardens), Janet Gates (Senior Horticulturist – Durban Botanic Gardens) and Durban Botanic Gardens General Labourer Innocent Dlamini

Pen Pics - Martin Clement: Curator

Martin Clement, the Garden's Curator since 2011, is an horticultural eclectic, fascinated by the people-plant relationships that attend the historical advent of botanic gardens. This departure from the conventional led to an early interest in botanic gardens education and horticultural therapy. After qualifying as an horticulturist, he obtained a B.Sc. degree in Geography and Psychology, and an honours degree from UKZN in Environmental Management, in which he researched the 'Sense of Place' pertaining to the Gardens he now curates.

His research suggests that significant moments and experiences link many people to the Gardens, and that for many, they are a place of stability, continuity and yet constant freshness. For Martin, such continuity implies a responsibility not only to the lineage of curatorship of which he is now a part, but also to the identity the Gardens has acquired through the affection in which it is held.

While the Gardens themselves represent stability, Martin's views on horticulture are in transition. In his view, the potential of the profession is to be found in horticulture's practical application to our most pressing societal and environmental challenges – climate instability, food security, ecological restoration and social justice. For Martin,

ecosystem, and plant-based solutions will be fundamental to how we inhabit tomorrow's cities, and botanic gardens have a role in shaping a new urban horticulture. In seeking to amplify the profession's relevance, Martin has found a champion in the Durban Botanic Gardens Trust, and his curatorship has invigorated the partnering of their aspirations.

In pursuing these aspirations, the shared vision of the Trust, the Gardens and the City is emerging as a powerful statement of ecological citizenship and dynamic partnering with the corporate and private sectors. For Martin, this convergence of skills and values is needed to situate horticulture at the centre of a more just and sustainable urbanism.

Back at home, Martin's interests include indigenous and food gardens, spending time with his wife and two children, and riding his mountain bike.

Old faithful

Twice a day for 5 years and still faithful. Johannes Ngcobo is a gardener in the Musgrave area. As part of his job description, he is tasked, twice-daily, with walking his employer's dogs, a duty he has attended to in the Durban Botanic Gardens for the last five years. Monday to Friday his schedule is unaltered – half-an-hour in the morning and half-an-hour in the afternoon. Johannes does not plan to change his routine anytime soon. Softly-spoken, and perhaps diffidently given to brevity, Johannes offers only that he "likes the peace of the Garden." He also appears to enjoy the daily exchange of greetings with Durban Botanic Gardens staff, to whom he is a familiar figure. As an aside, he notes "I like the Cycads" and then offers that the Gardens are "a nice place to walk", the "only place like this in the city." Johannes will not say more, but sometimes less is more.



Walking home – ten years in the Durban Botanic Gardens

“The beauty of the Gardens is the reciprocation of the love I feel for them. Everything is a gift...a kingfisher, the light in the trees” - Sarah Kearney -

Every weekday, for the last ten years, Sarah Kearney has come, alone and phoneless, to walk and breathe in the Durban Botanic Gardens.

This fidelity to place contrasts with an earlier life in which she ran and climbed, journeyed far, and loved, perhaps like Othello... “not wisely, but too well”. Exposed by her African travels to a host of recurring tropical diseases and two calamitous relationships, Kearney retreated with chronic fatigue syndrome and two young children to Durban, and a bed-ridden existence, emotionally and physically exhausted. After a period of convalescence, she visited the Durban Botanic Gardens, where she found herself able to walk for ten minutes. Often, arriving at the Gardens feeling ill, she would leave refreshed. Gradually, she built up to half-an-hour, and now, ten years later, is sometimes on her feet for two hours. Obligated by debility to let go of running and climbing, Sarah says quietly that “walking is the path for me now.” As her relationship with the Gardens unfolded walk-by-walk, she found – somewhere between the athlete and the invalid – a middle way.

As Sarah walked on, the connection between a growing emotional stability and the steady companionship of the Gardens became compelling – her need for rootedness was met by that of the trees. The faithfulness of their presence, their leaves and colours became her solace, her sacrament and her sanctuary. Sarah found herself coming to the Gardens to “pay homage”, to “greet them” and to enter the “sacred space” that had become for her a container of awareness.

While her words are free of religious affiliation, her reverence for the immediate, and her willingness to be still are the hallmarks of meditative and prayerful practices deemed curative for millennia. That such practices catalyse the virtue of gratitude is evident when speaking to Sarah. While past relationships have led to betrayal, her love for the Gardens has been abundantly “reciprocated”; in her daily observances “everything is a gift”, “something is always revealed.”

For this adherent, the continuity and containment of the Gardens over a period of many years and thousands of visits appears to have provided “physical, emotional and spiritual healing.” Again, such therapeutic outcomes recall contemplative endeavours the world over, in which repetition, ritual, embodied movement and Nature are the spaces that hold and heal us.

Sarah Kearney’s consecration of the Durban Botanic Gardens is neither credulous nor strange. While her story is not the usual stuff of Botanic Gardens literature, its rarity in such literature is our loss. This is because the Gardens offer a similar invitation to all who enter, even if few are able, or willing to speak of it. But for those who are open, and available, as Sarah Kearney was, this grace amidst the greenery is offered to all.



To Shoot

The stories appearing in this section of Woodiana bear witness to the individual, and sometimes deeply personal paths by which people come to regard the Gardens as meaningful in their lives. The Durban Botanic Gardens Trust are keenly aware of the intangible ways in which the Gardens has a place in the hearts of City residents, and believe that these attachments are worthy of documentation

If the stories here resonate with you, or recall experiences of your own, then please do share them with us. And consider supporting the Durban Botanic Gardens Trust to maintain the Gardens as a place of sanctuary

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Should you donate to the Durban Botanic Gardens Trust, you are investing in the future work of the Gardens in areas of Plant Conservation, Education, Heritage, Research and Horticultural Excellence. There are a number of exciting projects which need support, ranging from cycad security, new garden features, maintenance of existing projects, restoring heritage spaces in the Gardens, and the water conservation project.

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