

AD

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Nature's Bounty

At Johannesburg 1207 in South Africa's Franschhoek Valley, plantsman Dané Erwee is creating an idyllic garden and filling its rooms with lush greenery and floral displays





Words
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Photography
Greg Cox

FROM TOP: In the kitchen of one of the suites, lemons from a Cape rough-skinned lemon pop against a teal wall. The milk glass plates, vases and jugs were found at Cape Town's Milneron Flea Market; A potted cat's paw orchid, set in a hand-carved basin from Stone Age.



For as long as the gardener and floral designer Dané Erwee can remember, his life has revolved around plants. In fact, his relationship with them predates his own memories: there's a family story of Erwee's mother taking him out on the farm dam in a small boat when he was a baby, and packing the *waterblommetjies* (water hawthorn) she was harvesting from the water around him as he slept. His first recollection of planting something dates to when he was "about five or six years old", when his grandmother gave him some clovia seeds. Watching them grow sparked his passion for plants.

Growing up on a vegetable farm means that horticulture has always been an integral part of Erwee's life, and his path from being a child who helped with the cuttings led quite naturally on from being a young man studying landscape design in the mid-1990s, to his emergence as one half of the game-changing floristry duo, Okasia, during the early 2000s. With his partner Chris Willemsse, Erwee created a signature style that shifted the way celebratory flowers are seen in South Africa.

To ensure that they had the flora they needed to create Okasia's dramatic floral arrangements, the duo acquired a property in Johannesdal – just outside Stellenbosch – on which they could "plant for the vase", says Erwee. As a result, their garden is more like a flower farm; it's the place where the armfuls of David Austin roses, long-stemmed hydrangeas and crab-apple and plum-blossom branches that are needed for their work grow abundantly. While this means that they don't really have their own home garden as such, Erwee regularly designs them for clients.

Among Okasia's latest projects is the development of the gardens at Johannesdal 1207 in Prins, just on the Franschhoek side of the famously lovely Helderberg pass. The low-key luxe property combines indoor and outdoor event spaces with boutique accommodation.

Here, Erwee says, the challenge is to create an ultra-romantic, sumptuous garden setting using the native bulbs, fynbos plants and grasses in which his interest has lately been piqued. However, these need to be used in harmony with the property's existing fruit trees, including plums, kumquats and pomegranates, which reflect the area's centuries-old fruit-farming tradition.

Plants are present throughout Johannesdal 1207. In this suite, a vintage rattan bed is surrounded by plants including an orchid, Pilea robusta and cattleya orchids in classic terracotta pots.



This spectacular botanical bathroom display includes a Ruxton fern, a Marantaceae delicious leaf, a heartbe palm (far left), a pencil cactus and bromeliad Strelitzia nicotai (far right).



PRODUCTION: IVEN ALBERGINS

"This was a fruit farm and we must keep that spirit," says Erwee, adding that his current plan is to create a very layered design. He is retaining existing fig trees, for example, and underplanting these with raspberries – but will then add some indigenous botanicals, such as South Africa's increasingly well-known buchu plants, some of which have been used to make teas and other medicinal infusions for thousands of years.

The gardens at Johannesburg 1207 are thus, at time goes by, set to become a judicious mix of indigenous flora within an English-style planting scheme. It will be "like a sort of herbaceous border," says Erwee, who is intrigued by the possibilities of combining the plants of the world-renowned Cape Floral Kingdom with the grass species that are more readily associated with the rest of Africa. In effect, what he is suggesting is a massed planting design somewhat in the style of Dutch master gardener Piet Oudolf, but using a unique mix of local species. "I've been thinking about white klip dagg (Leonotis nepetifolia), which flowers twice a year, with the soft yellow flowers of carnival bush (Ochna serrulata)," he says, "Or perhaps a 'frame' of conetti bush (Coleonema calycinum) that you fill in with other indigenous plants."

Both landscaping and floristry are about setting a mood, and Erwee's preference remains with the rambling, the overgrown and the romantic. And of course, there has to be an ongoing focus on planting for the summer wedding season at Johannesburg 1207. So, he's exploring the possibilities of cosmos, poppies and nicotianas – and any and every plant that facilitates the creation of very modern floristry in the tradition of English designer Constance Spry. Her graphic stem and flower style remains a key influence on Willemse's and Erwee's work. Okasie's creations show off every element of a plant, from flowers to seeds, leaves and stems.

Bold and unusual blooms are of particular interest to Daneé at the moment too, from the huge white and purple flowers of Strelitzia nicotai to the delicately strange, shell-like blooms of the *Monstera deliciosa*. In short, whether he is crafting a bold floral arrangement or creating a new garden, it's all about "finding the right plant combinations" in order to create new visions of beauty. johannesdal.co.za, okasie.co.za

WAY OF LIFE



FROM TOP: Erwee is focused on "finding the right plant combinations." Here, he places a potted pencil cactus on a veranda. The daybed was crafted from salvaged wood at Okasie; a pressed botanical artwork is paired with a framed vintage tapestry and a gourd basket from Design Afrika.