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In Blossom

At the new JOHANNESDAL 1207
development in Pniel,
plantsman, gardener
and
FLORAL WIZARD
DANÉ ERWEE
is creating a world of
enchanted
BOTANICAL
BEAUTY.

WORDS | ROBYN ALEXANDER

THIS PAGE A dramatic arrangement by gardener and floristry designer Dané Erwee, featuring hydrangeas and trailing *Amaranthus caudatus* in multiple vessels and vases, is placed on a vintage table in Die Stoepekamer (The Reading Room) at Johannesburg 1207 events venue. **OPPOSITE** A botanical artwork by Dané at Johannesburg 1207, featuring pressed flowers, stems and leaves.

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FOR AS LONG AS 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 Dané's mother taking him out on the farm dam in a small boat when he was a baby, and packing the waterblommetjies (*Aponogeton distachyos* flowers) she was harvesting from the water around him as he slept. His first conscious recollection of planting something dates back to when he was "about five or six years old", Dané says, when his grandmother gave him some clivia seeds. He planted them, "and they grew".

Growing up on a vegetable farm means that plant knowledge has always been an integral part of Dané's life, and his path from being a child who helped with the cuttings has led quite naturally onwards to being a young man studying landscape design (in the mid-1990s, at what is now the Cape Peninsula University of Technology) and his emergence as one half of the game-changing floristry duo, OKASIE, in Stellenbosch during the early 2000s. With his partner at OKASIE, Chris Willemse, Dané created a signature style that permanently shifted the way celebratory flowers are seen in South Africa.

To ensure they had the flora they needed to create OKASIE's distinctively dramatic arrangements, Dané and Chris acquired a property in Johannesdal, just outside Stellenbosch, on which they could "plant for the vase", says Dané. As a result, their "home garden" is more like a flower farm; it's the place where the David Austin roses, long-stemmed hydrangeas, and crab-apple and plum-blossom branches needed for their work come from.

Among OKASIE's latest projects is the development of the gardens at Johannesdal 1207. A luxe property located in Pniel, just on the Franschoek side of the famously lovely Helshoogte Pass, 1207 combines multiple inside and outside venue spaces with boutique accommodation. Here, Dané says, the challenge is to create an ultra-romantic and luxurious garden setting – and to do so long-term, with native bulbs, fynbos plants and grasses. However, these need to be used in harmonious combination with the property's existing fruit trees (which include plums, kumquats and pomegranates), and reflect the history of this particular place too: Pniel has been a fruit-farming area since the mid-1700s.

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

The gardens at Johannesdal 1207 are thus, as time goes by, set to become a judicious mix of indigenous flora within an English-style planting scheme. Dané is intrigued by the possibilities of combining the plants of the world-renowned Cape Floral Kingdom with the grass species 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. For example, Dané says, "I've been thinking about white klip dagga (*Leonotis nepetifolia*), which flowers twice a year, with the soft yellow flowers of carnival bush (*Ochna serrulata*). Or perhaps a 'frame' of confetti bush (*Coleonema calycinum*) filled in with other indigenous plants."

Both landscaping and floristry are about setting a mood, and Dané's preference remains with the rambling, the overgrown and the romantic. And of course, there has to be an ongoing focus on planting for summer at Johannesdal 1207 – after all, that's the season when many of the weddings that will take place here will be celebrated. So he's exploring the possibilities of cosmos, poppies and nicotianas – and any and every plant that facilitates the creation of modern floristry in the tradition of English designer Constance Spry. Her graphic "stem and flower" style remains a key influence on Chris and Dané's work: OKASIE's creations show off every physical element of a plant, from flowers to seeds, leaves and stems.

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

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Dané with his Great Dane, Tiny; a private veranda off one of the accommodation suites at Johannesdal 1207 features a selection of broad-leaved indoor plants in terracotta pots; a shaded corner includes a water feature made from an old urn, flanked by moonflower creepers (*Datura innoxia*), and with creeping wire vine (*Muehlenbeckia axillaris*) planted at its base; in this suite, a recessed shelf showcases an unsigned still life, and a bowl filled with glazed ceramic fruits and seed pods by Ceramic Matters.

johannesdal.co.za | okasie.co.za

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THIS PAGE In the kitchen of one of the accommodation suites, branches from a Cape rough skinned lemon (*Citrus jambhiri* "Cape rough") pop against a teal wall. **OPPOSITE** One of the more intimate venues at Johannesburg 1207 is Die Stoep (The Veranda), furnished with wooden farm tables and benches. The floral arrangement featuring hydrangeas is typical of OKASIE's style, which follows in the footsteps of Constance Spry in terms of showcasing both stem and flower.





THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE This botanical bathroom display - curated and styled by Dané - includes a sword or Boston fern (*Nephrolepis exaltata*), a *Monstera deliciosa* leaf, a Kentia palm, a pencil cactus (*Euphorbia tirucalli*) and a banana-like *Strelitzia nicolai*; a tall *Camellia sasanqua* plant provides a romantic botanical touch in one of the suites; another ultra-romantic bathroom display features tree dahlia (*Dahlia imperialis*) stems, hydrangeas, wild roses and field poppy foliage; a pressed-botanical artwork by Dané's team combines charmingly with a framed vintage tapestry. OPPOSITE Plants are everywhere present at Johannesburg 1207.

