

A garden for all the senses

In just two years, a dedicated team at Mirtehof has created a breathtaking oasis in the Karoo.

By **Marlene Malan** • Photographs **Francois Oberholster** and **Amora Erasmus**

THE HOMEOWNERS

Bets Janse van Rensburg and Stevan Möller

WHERE Prince Albert in the Karoo

SIZE 4.7 hectares

TYPE OF SOIL Sandy, clay and rocky (with rocky layers in the subsoil)

The first thing that catches your eye is the glorious view. Then the aromas hit you: star jasmine, gardenia, honeysuckle, alyssum, myrtle, mint and rosemary, followed by the sound of birds twittering, the wind stirring the leaves and water bubbling in the pond. And if you're lucky enough to stay in the guesthouse, you also get to taste fresh veggies from the garden and fruit from the trees. A visit to the impressive gardens of the historic Mirtehof estate in Prince Albert is a 'sensory' experience in every sense of the word.

The entire estate is a feast for the eyes but it's the 2 500m² garden below the

manor house and surrounded by low white walls that is so breathtaking. This garden, where plantings began in 2017 once construction of the main house, guesthouse and outbuildings was completed, is a colourful conglomeration of roses, shrubs, flowering plants and veggies, carefully arranged in avenues and on pergolas, between walkways and patios.

Mirtehof, in all its glory, is a long-time dream for owners Dr Bets Janse van Rensburg and her husband Stevan Möller of Bloemfontein. With the help of landscaper Rentia Verster, building contractors Adan Liepner and Neels Swart

of Agri Eco Earth, and Karoo plant specialist Sue Dean of Renu-Karoo, they have transformed this 4.7ha smallholding from ordinary to extraordinary.

Someday, Bets and Stevan plan to retire here. "I grew up in the Senekal area of the Free State on a farm full of roses and other flowers," says Bets. "We often visited Prince Albert as our bond with the town stretches way back to the early 1900s when my great-grandfather, Christiaan Jacobus Bam, was the magistrate here.

"We own a house in Market Street, but Stevan and I had always wanted to open a guesthouse." >>



A water furrow runs through the property – much to the delight of the resident frogs and birds. The wooden and metal structures are not only garden ornaments but also provide support for climbing plants such as roses.



A dream becomes reality

The opportunity to open a guesthouse presented itself in January 2017 when Mirtehof came onto the market.

Rentia clearly remembers the first day she came to view the property with Bets and Stevan. “The incredible location, with the Swartberg mountain as a backdrop, immediately caught our eye,” she says.

However, the beautiful house, which had already been restored, only had two bedrooms so the couple had it redesigned and converted into three spacious suites: Prince Albert, Arcadia and The Orchard. They also built two separate cottages

(Bets and Stevan have dubbed them Bonnie and Clyde after their miniature horses) at the bottom of the property, the perfect place for a secluded stay.

Once the construction work was completed, it was time for the garden.

From the get-go, Rentia knew she had to incorporate strong design elements – with plenty of flowers for Bets.

“I also realised I would have to break up the ornamental garden into smaller sections if we wanted to have a meaningful garden.” Every piece of ground was first measured and then photographed.

Stevan, who works in the agricultural and property industry and also has technical and practical knowledge of structural elements, wanted a garden that would be useful. Bets, a pathologist, wanted to recreate the farm garden of her youth, a place where friends and children love to visit and where everyone can enjoy good food and wine. She is very creative and loves to share with others, and wanted the garden to reflect this ‘abundance’ in her personality. It had to be an oasis, a place of healing and positivity for the owners, guests and workers alike. >>

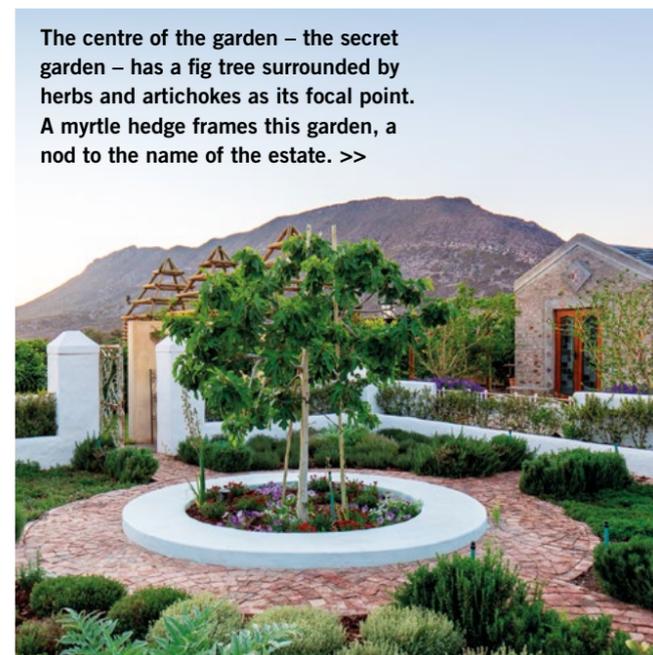


The well-equipped garden cottage, with its living room and stoep overlooking a plunge pool, is perfect for guests in need of rest and relaxation. Bougainvillea and vygies (right), which do well in the Karoo, add colour and volume. The stonework throughout the garden was done by Rock of Ages.

Bets's beloved 'Gold Bunny' roses adorn the metal arches – each arch supports a single climbing rose, yet it looks like more than one plant on each, thanks to the abundance of blooms. Flowering plants and herbs in the raised beds brighten up the pathway leading to the lemon orchard.



The raised garden patio with its hanging chairs is one of Bets and Rentia's favourites spots. It is situated right next to the pond (*below right*) and offers a wonderful view of the Swartberg mountain in the distance.



The centre of the garden – the secret garden – has a fig tree surrounded by herbs and artichokes as its focal point. A myrtle hedge frames this garden, a nod to the name of the estate. >>



It's difficult to choose my favourite corner. *The best thing about the garden is all the seating areas that allow you to experience nature.* Nature makes me feel alive. – Bets

Teamwork

Right from the start, their motto was teamwork. “All of us – including the landscaper, architect and builders – had to work closely together,” says Bets.

Rentia wanted to express her love of geometric lines, structure and dimension. She believes that softness and creativity in a garden only come to the fore if they have a good structural foundation. Elements from the surroundings – such as stone and wood – were on Bets’s wish list.

Rentia asked Bets to research some ideas and put them together in a scrapbook. Eventually, they all had their own set of ideas – from the architect and building team to the stonemason.

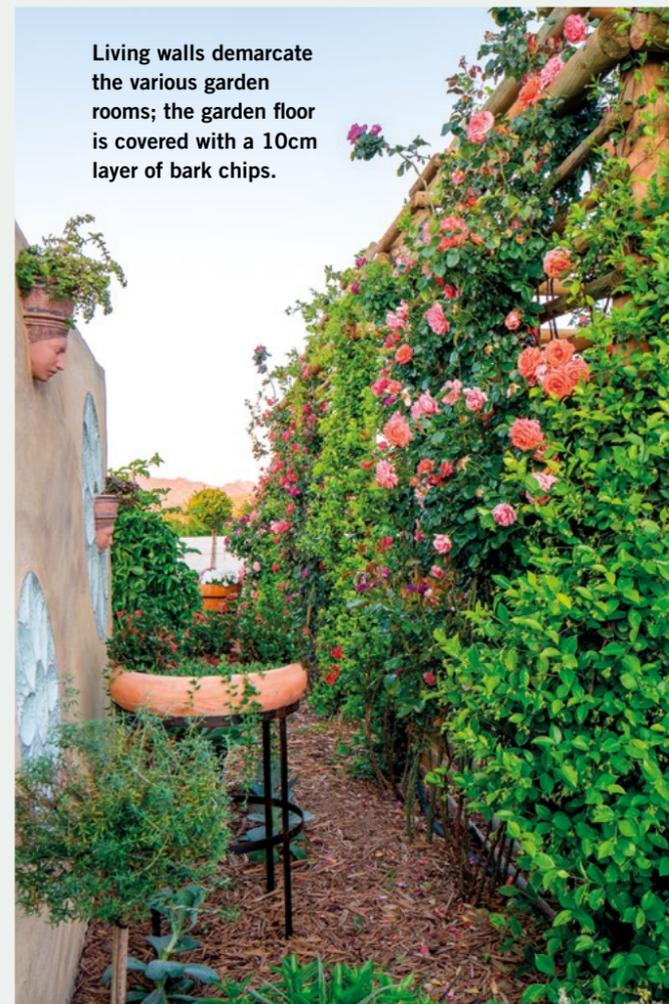
Bets, Stevan and Rentia all like order, so Rentia incorporated structures such as low whitewashed walls. “I was inspired by the

Cape Dutch architecture of the main homestead,” she says.

“I wanted to play textures off against each other. Height and balance were important. Both Bets and I don’t like a path that is too narrow or a roof that is too high. I would say that’s what took up most of our time – getting the dimensions of the garden and the balance just right.

“It was important for the garden not to be dwarfed by the mountain behind it; at the same time, it shouldn’t look overdone or steal attention away from this beautiful natural wonder.

“Bets, like me, has an eye for space. For example, I can see that a particular block is too small, or a path is too narrow, or a pergola is too high. Our planning took six months. We only started gardening seriously two years ago.” >>



Living walls demarcate the various garden rooms; the garden floor is covered with a 10cm layer of bark chips.



Hanging baskets of flowering plants add colour to the vegetable garden where Stevan grows red and green cabbages, among others, in raised wooden boxes. The chicken coop is visible in the background.

Loungers have been placed in various spots around the garden so that guests can relax and fully enjoy the sights and sounds.



Stevan and Bets’s daughter Delene made the birdhouses, which add a playful element to the garden.



Stevan and Bets’s two miniature horses, Bonnie and Clyde (left).



Karoo strategies

While Bets's desire was to have an inspirational garden filled with her favourite ornamental plants and an abundance of flowers, Stevan wanted an edible garden.

"I had to create a space with a specific personality," says Rentia. "It had to be a combination of abundance and usefulness. Our goal was to design the garden as 'an experience'," she says. But what would work in this Karoo environment?

To create respite from the heat, and also to prevent the soil from drying out too quickly, structures such as pergolas and canopies were erected, and more than 40 different types of indigenous trees were planted – mostly already quite big. "The Karoo climate and fertile soil – thanks to an excessive amount of compost that we worked in – ensured rapid growth," says Rentia.

Every centimetre of open soil was covered with a 10cm mulch of bark chips to protect soil micro-organisms. This not only improves the health of the soil but also makes it much more water retentive.

Since water is scarce and precious in the Karoo, waterwise plants were a priority for Rentia: these include spekboom, succulents, *Felicia amelloides*, wild dagga, Cape honeysuckle, plumbago, sour fig, bougainvillea and Karoo plants such as aloes.

Plants with a dense, lush look that give the garden a fuller appearance were planted in small containers or brick and stone structures and only get water around the stems.

And look carefully: the rose spectacle is thanks to just eight roses that have completely covered the pergolas.

In the end, only 40m² of the garden requires regular irrigation; the water comes from a pond on the property which is fed by three boreholes and *leiwat* from the Swartberg mountain. The roses, lemon trees, bay trees and artichokes receive most of this precious water.

"In the future, we will reconsider seasonal plants such as petunias, arctotis, nasturtiums and pansies that need to be supplemented on a regular basis," says Rentia. "They will be reduced and gradually replaced by perennial and more waterwise plants.

"Splashes of colour are essential but we'll use nasturtiums and pansies on a smaller scale." >>

[THE HISTORY OF MIRTEHOF]

As part of the planning process, Stevan did extensive research on the estate in the Frans Pienaar Museum in Prince Albert. He discovered that in the 1890s, Mirtehof (when the name was still Myrtle Grove) belonged to Abraham de Vries, whose daughter Helena was in love with poet and author CJ Langenhoven of Oudtshoorn. However, Abraham forced Helena to break off her engagement with the poet because of the "uncertainty" of his future and career.

Among others, Stevan came across letters dating from 100 years ago in which Mirtehof was described as a paradise of roses, flowers, fruit trees and, in particular, fig trees. Then came the ostrich era and the garden all but disappeared. "We were unwittingly recreating a piece of history," says Bets.



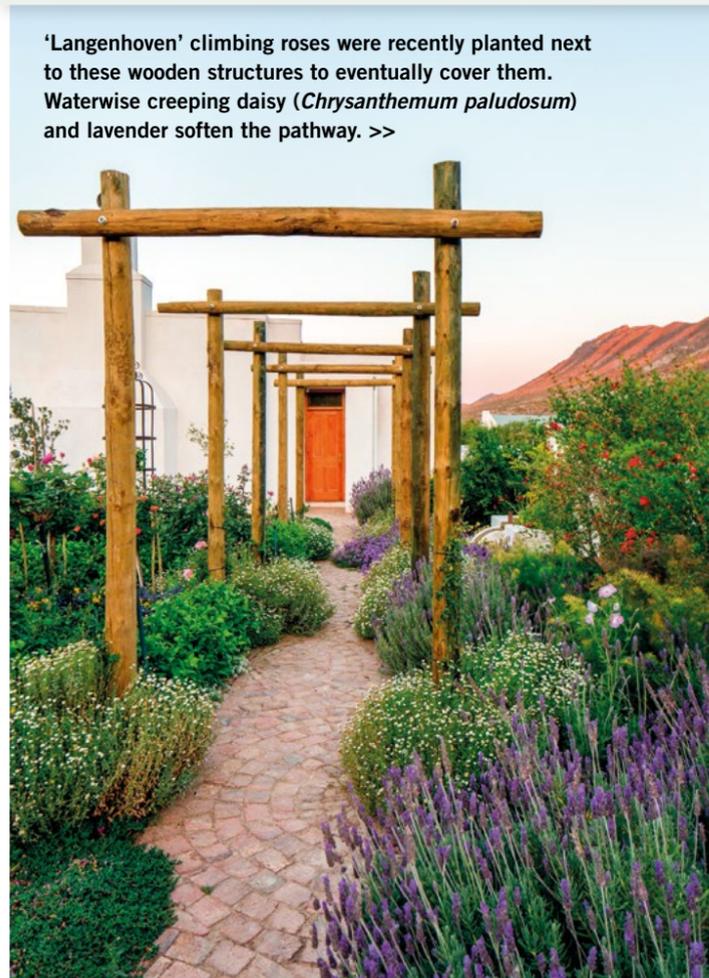
What would a Karoo garden be without a windmill? In this part of the garden, they plan to plant pumpkins and watermelons.



When we realised it had taken *two years to get everything the way we wanted it*, it felt like we needed a three-year holiday. – Rentia



'Coral Panarosa' climbing roses add colour to the rose pergolas.



'Langenhoven' climbing roses were recently planted next to these wooden structures to eventually cover them. Waterwise creeping daisy (*Chrysanthemum paludosum*) and lavender soften the pathway. >>



Before



Work begins...



Purple 'Vodacom' standard roses contrast beautifully with orange-red miniature 'Rainbow's End' roses.



No matter where you are in this garden, the Swartberg mountain is an ever-present backdrop to the spectacle below.



'Deloitte & Touche' roses flower prolifically almost all year round beside a low white wall (left) that separates the lawn next to the main house from the garden.



Stevan's favourite place, his vegetable garden, can be enjoyed from the stoep at the main house. The *Wisteria sinensis* on the pergola provides much-needed shade from the sweltering Karoo sun. >>



Throughout the process, we tried to ensure that it wouldn't be obvious that the garden was newly designed. Good design can give a garden a lived-in look, despite the fact that it is still young. – Rentia



The *Aptenia cordifolia* in the foreground is a hardy groundcover that regularly bears pink flowers.

The gardening team including (from left) Nicolaas Hendriks, Geri Koera, Jonathan Prins and Thys Berdine receive training to ensure that they stay on top of the garden's maintenance.



The dam wall was planted up with indigenous plants such as aloe, vygie, plumbago, Cape honeysuckle and felica, with a few mother-in-law's tongue here and there – the latter also thrives in the Karoo. >>



GARDEN PLAN

- A** Guest cottage with stoep and braai area
- B** Plunge pool
- C** Raised garden patio with pergola overlooking pond and mountain
- D** Garden boma with circular stone wall
- E** Myrtle garden with myrtle hedge, veggies such as artichokes, herbs such as thyme, oregano and rosemary, and a fig tree as a focal point
- F** Citrus tunnel (with raised beds) that provides shade for scented pelargoniums as well as herbs such as mint, basil and parsley
- G** Greenhouse to protect young seedlings and to house frost-sensitive potted plants
- H** Wooden planter boxes with canopy for mixed seasonal vegetables
- I** Chicken coop
- J** Raised veggie bed with lattice roof for crop rotation of vegetables
- K** Granadilla pergola
- L** Windmill and farm dam
- M** Grapevine pergola that provides shade for barrels filled with mint and strawberries
- N** Informal pond with cut flowers and bird area
- O** Arched tunnel for broad beans and pumpkins
- P** Vegetables such as sunflowers and sweet potatoes, as well as spanspek and guavas
- Q** Veggie boxes for mixed seasonal plantings
- R** Small grapevine pergola
- S** Scented pergolas with fragrant plantings such as climbing roses and star jasmine
- T** Waterwise area with succulents, aloes and vygies, plus bougainvilleas
- U** Raised hedge with bay and artichokes
- V** Pomegranate avenue surrounded by lavender
- W** Rose garden with 'Langenhoven' climbing roses
- X** Raised beds with scented plants such as star jasmine and roses, plus lime trees
- Y** Formal water feature with bronze bird statues by Jacques Fuller
- Z** Orchard 🏡

CONTACTS AND STOCKISTS

Agri Eco Earth 083 922 3588
 Jacques Fuller jacquesfuller.com
 Mirtehof Guest Farm Estate 023 541 1199, mirtehof.co.za
 Rentia Verster Landscaping 082 573 5536,
 versterrentia@gmail.com Rock of Ages 083 458 5467
 Renu-Karoo 082 770 0206, renu-karoo.co.za

For more photographs of Mirtehof, go to homemag.co.za, or visit mirtehof.co.za to view their gallery or to book a stay.

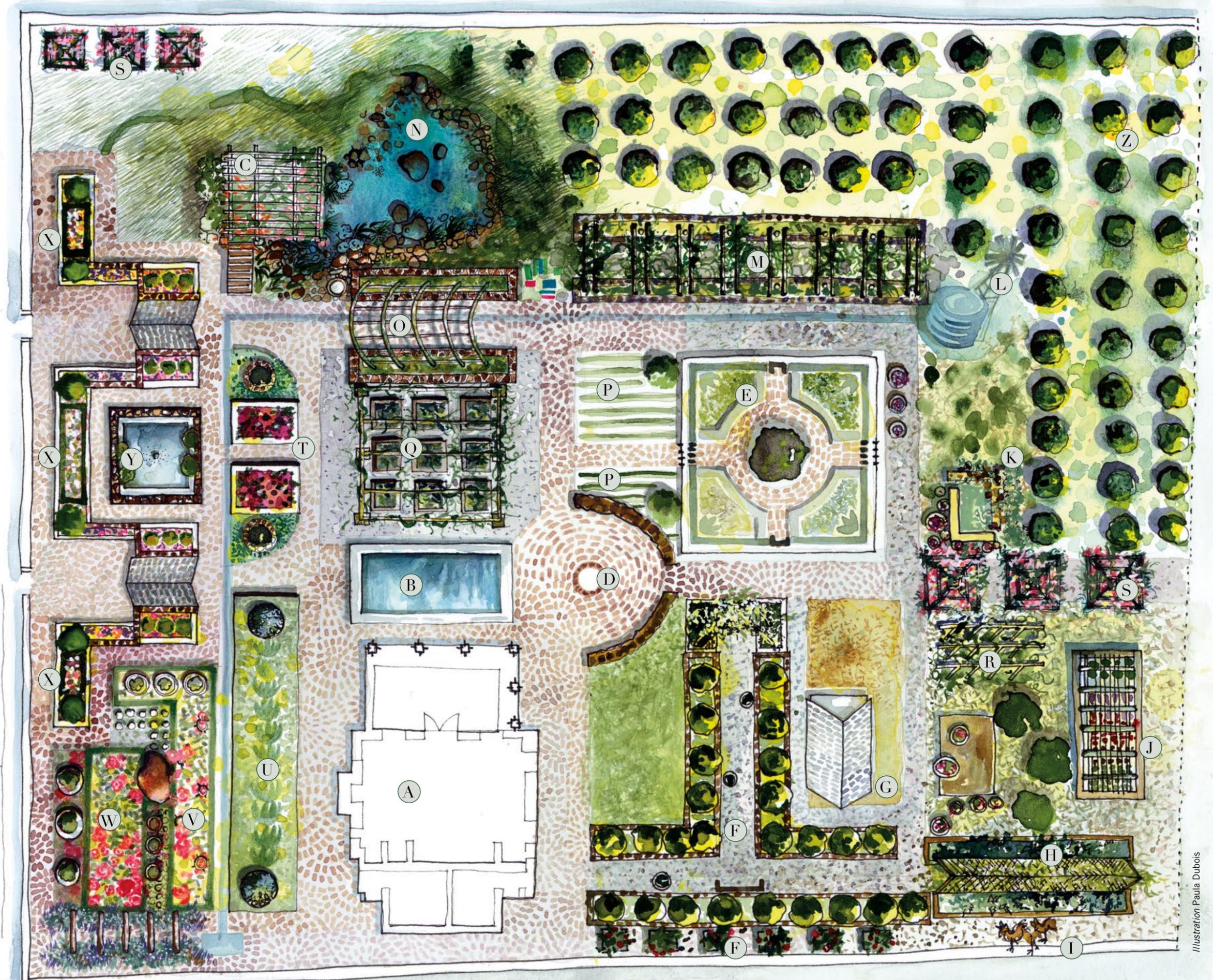


Illustration Paula Dubois