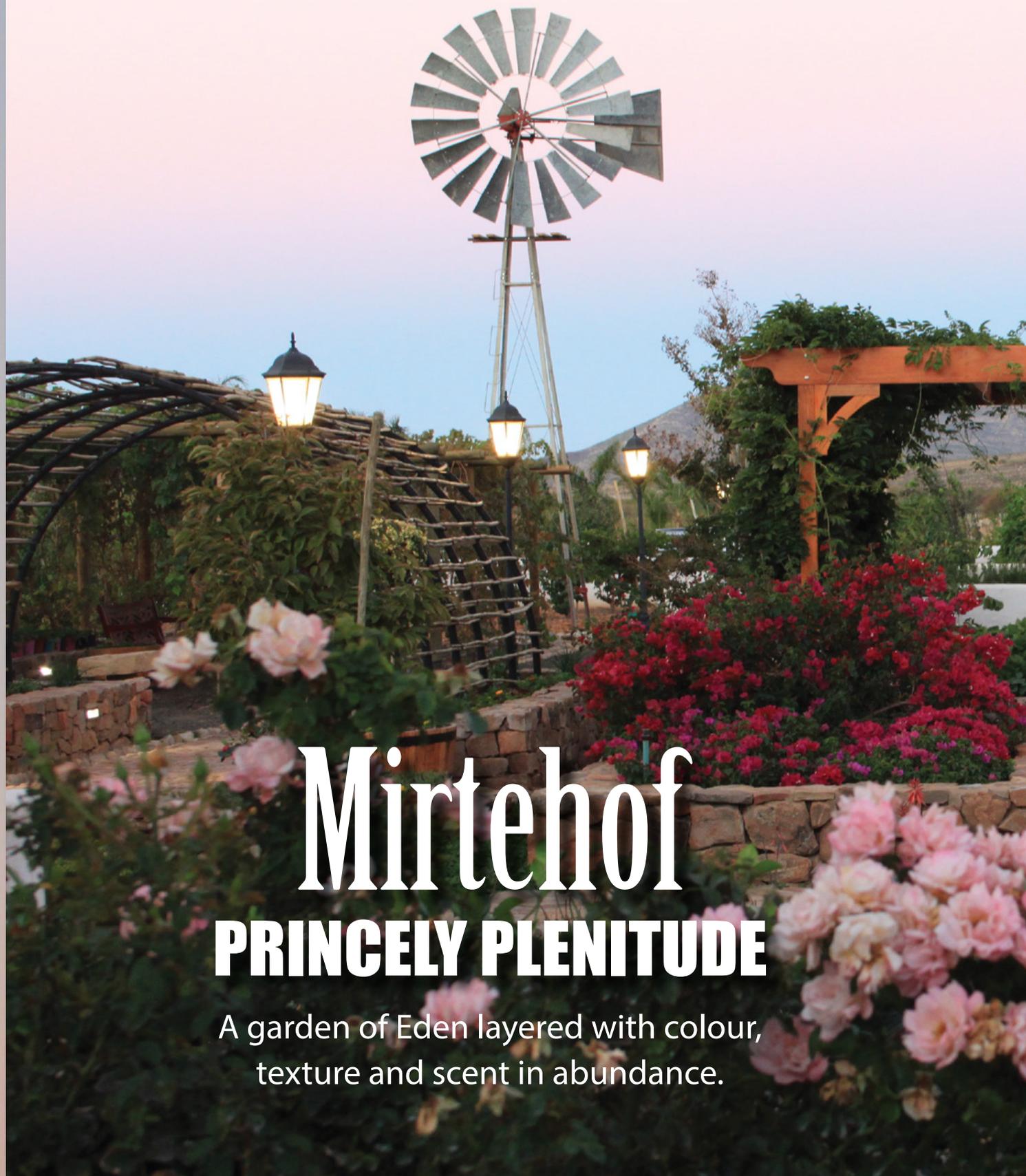


GARDEN FEATURE



Mirtehof

PRINCELY PLENITUDE

A garden of Eden layered with colour,
texture and scent in abundance.



This magnificent garden in the **Great Karoo** welcomes guests by putting its best foot forward, just like a gracious hostess on an **African farm** would when she lays her table with the old family silver and her finest table linen.



Great effort was put into the planning of the garden to achieve layering and create an old-world grace and charm. This is illustrated by allowing formal paving in formal areas to run to gravel, and rustic straw-mulched paths further away between informal plantings.



In a fertile valley fed by streams of water running down the northern slopes of the mighty **Swartberg** mountain range, a blooming farm garden is a total contradiction to the proverbial harshness of the **Great Karoo**...

One of the sayings by Afrikaans poet and author C.J. Langenhoven (loosely translated by me) is, "There are folks who can do what they want, but it is those people who will do what they can". The beautiful garden of Mirtehof Guest Farm Estate in Prince Albert, which was built up from nothing in only two and a half years, is proof of this saying.

Prince Albert has a rich history that even includes a short gold rush and royal influences. Once home to many eccentric and weird characters, the pretty town nowadays attracts artists and creative souls who exchanged the rat race of large cities for a more serene and relaxed

“The value of **shade** is in the
warm **SUN** around it”

– C.J. Langenhoven



existence in the country.

Dr. Bets Janse van Rensburg, one of the owners of Mirtehof, has a long history with Prince Albert, and when the property came on the market she and her spouse, Stevan Möller, bought it with the dream of creating a guest house, and later retiring there. After enlarging the main farm house and completing the building of guest cottages, they could start the planning of Bets’s dream garden – a garden in honour and in remembrance of the charming farm gardens she knew as a youngster. Stevan did some research about the history of Mirtehof in the Fransie Pienaar museum in town, and found letters more than a 100-years old that described the then garden of Mirtehof as a lush and productive farm garden filled with roses, flowers and

fruit trees. Unfortunately the garden succumbed to neglect and ruin during the ostrich feather boom.

The engine room fired up!

A resilient and energetic team started working and planning together to give a garden area of around 2500m² the structure and layout it needed. Stevan, who has an agricultural background, wanted a productive farm garden with vegetables, herbs and lots of fruit trees. Bets, a pathologist with a highly creative streak, wanted the old-world grace and abundance of a typical flower-filled farm garden. Professional landscape artist Rentia Verster





added her knowledge of strong garden structure and the logical use of space with her typical 'go big and go bold without overdoing it, or go home!' style. Building contractors Adan Liepner and Neels Swart from Agri-Eco-Earth built the hard-landscaping elements like pathways, pergolas, water features, walls and other structures, while ecologist Sue Milton-Dean of Renu Karoo advised on endemic Karoo plants.

Challenges and solutions

A hard climate with relentless summer sun, but cold winds and icy winters proves a challenge to a gardener dreaming about a lush farm garden. Rentia tackled the problem of protecting the garden by planting windbreaks and lots of hardy indigenous trees. To add a sense of shelter and enclosure, she divided the space into different garden rooms using vertical structures like pergolas, arches and roofed walkways soon to be covered by fast-growing evergreen and deciduous rambles and creepers, as well as climbing roses. These solutions have a dual purpose – they create private sitting nooks and intimate garden space for guests, as well as much-needed shade to protect other plants from the sun.

Large sections of the garden consist of a network of wide and comfortable pathways to wander along, bordered by raised, lushly planted beds for shrubs, perennials, seasonal colour and spilling groundcovers, while using wooden crates to house seasonal vegetables and herbs. Materials like stone and wood used

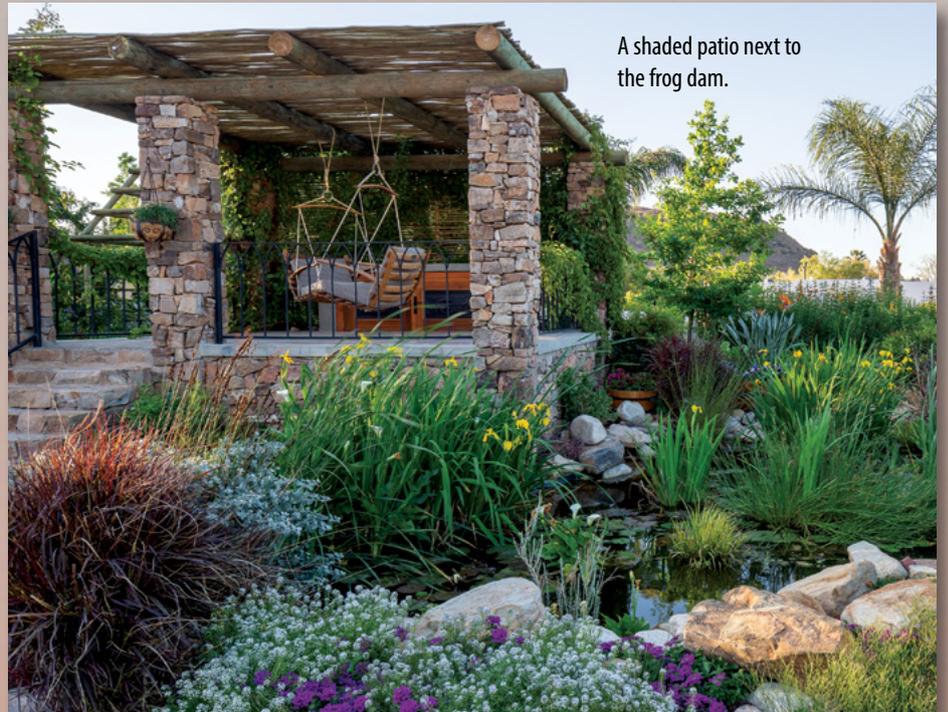
for building all the structural elements were sourced locally. The raised beds and crates make it much easier to maintain the garden.

The health and lushness of all the plants in this garden are due to very good soil preparation. "Tons and tons" of compost were added to the sandy and clay soil, and no bare soil is allowed. Thick mulching layers of bark, peach pips and straw are continuously renewed. They keep weeds down and the roots of the plants cool and

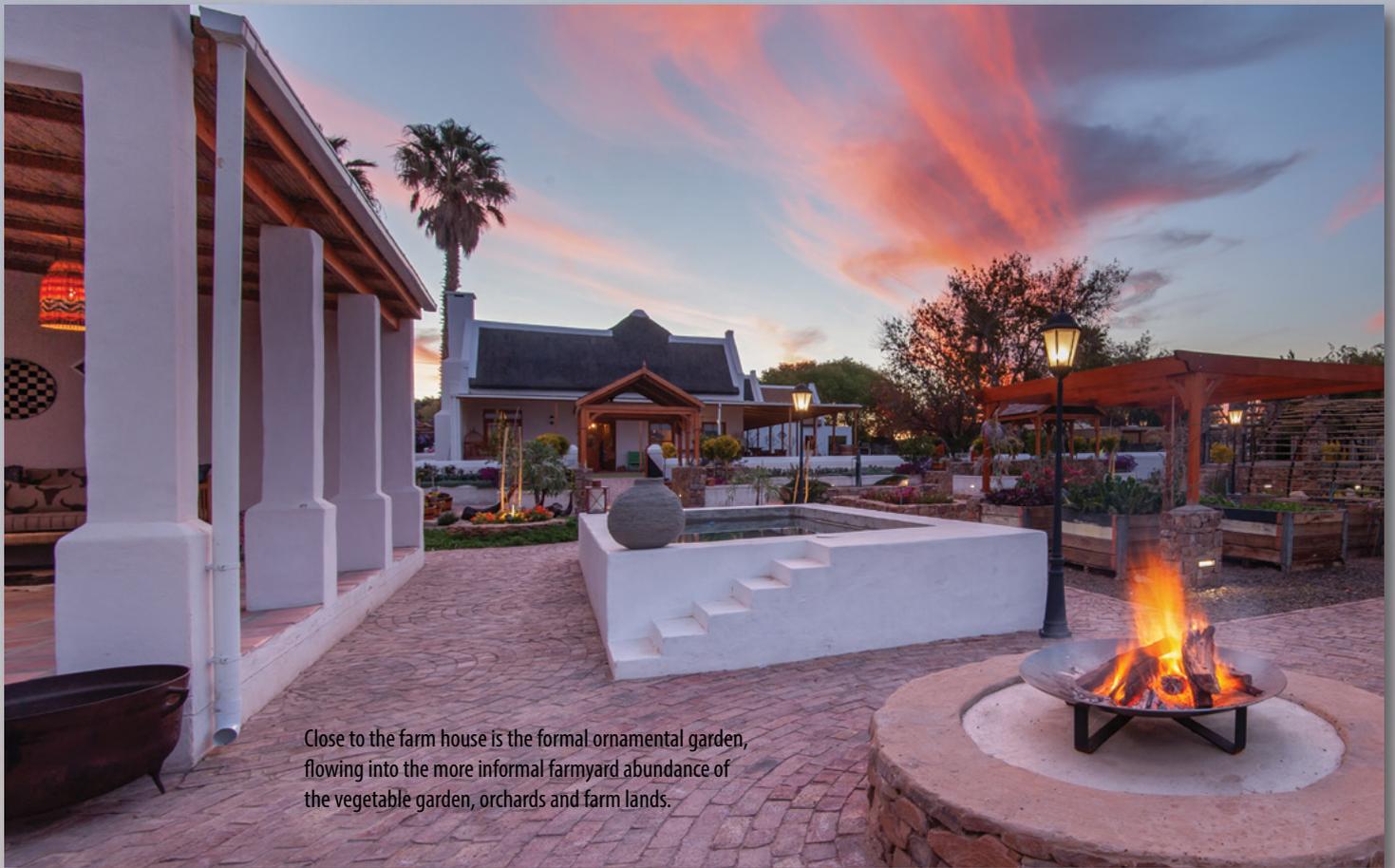
moist for longer. Organic mulches also protect the soil organisms from the sun and from drying out.

Now, what about water saving?

Water warriors and prophets of doom might regard this floral paradise with suspicion, wondering if water is not perhaps being wasted on such botanical luxury? Well, this is not the case at all!



A shaded patio next to the frog dam.



Close to the farm house is the formal ornamental garden, flowing into the more informal farmyard abundance of the vegetable garden, orchards and farm lands.



Roses as remembrance...

The beautiful rose plantings are also in honour of C.J. Langenhoven, who fell in love and got engaged in 1894 to Helena de Vries, the daughter of a previous owner of Mirtelhof. Her dad unfortunately put a stop to their relationship because he did not have trust in Langenhoven's life and career.

A formal pond with a bronze sculpture by Jacques Fuller.



Sticking to the best practise of garden zoning as a way to conserve a scarce natural resource, water-loving plants needing regular water were planted close to the buildings and mostly in barrels, and are watered along soil level – often by hand. In the medium-to-low water-usage zone, you should take notice of the plant choices used repeatedly and very creatively. These plants are old and hardy garden favourites that can turn any Karoo garden into full bloom, and have surprisingly low water needs once well-established.

A condensed plant list

“This garden changes all year long with flowers, textures and foliage – it’s an absolute concert of nature!”, says Rentia.

- **Fruit trees:** Fig, pomegranate, lychee, mango, pecan, almond, peach, lime and other citrus (mostly planted in barrels), quince, apricot and prune.
- **Creepers:** Grape vine, star jasmine, Mexican blood trumpet, bougainvillea, honeysuckle, golden shower, granadilla, petrea, black-eyed-Susan and wisteria.
- **Roses:** ‘Granny’s Delight’, ‘Karoo’, ‘Gold Bunny’, ‘Just Joey’, ‘Coral’ and ‘Papaya’ Panarosa, ‘Ubuntu’ Panarosa, ‘Vodacom’ and ‘King David’.
- **Shrubs and hedges:** Spekboom, plumbago, Cape honeysuckle, wild dagga, big num-num, myrtle, pride of India, spiraea, hydrangea, lavender and azalea.
- **Perennials and groundcovers:** Gazania, agapanthus, convolvulus, vygies, aptenia, osteospermum, felicia, erigeron, limonium, pelargonium, clivia, asparagus fern, thatching reed, fountain grass and artichoke.

The water sources for Mirttehof’s garden are three bore holes feeding a large soil dam, and allocated ‘leiwater’ from the Swartberg. Water naturally forms a large part of the garden with a swimming pool for guests, formal water elements and fountains, a frog dam and a bubbling water stream running through the garden to cool it down. 🐸





Go for a visit

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Old objects are recycled and containers like barrels are planted up with dahlias, fragrant frangipani trees, hibiscuses, big num-nums, strelitzias and star jasmynes and displayed all over.

