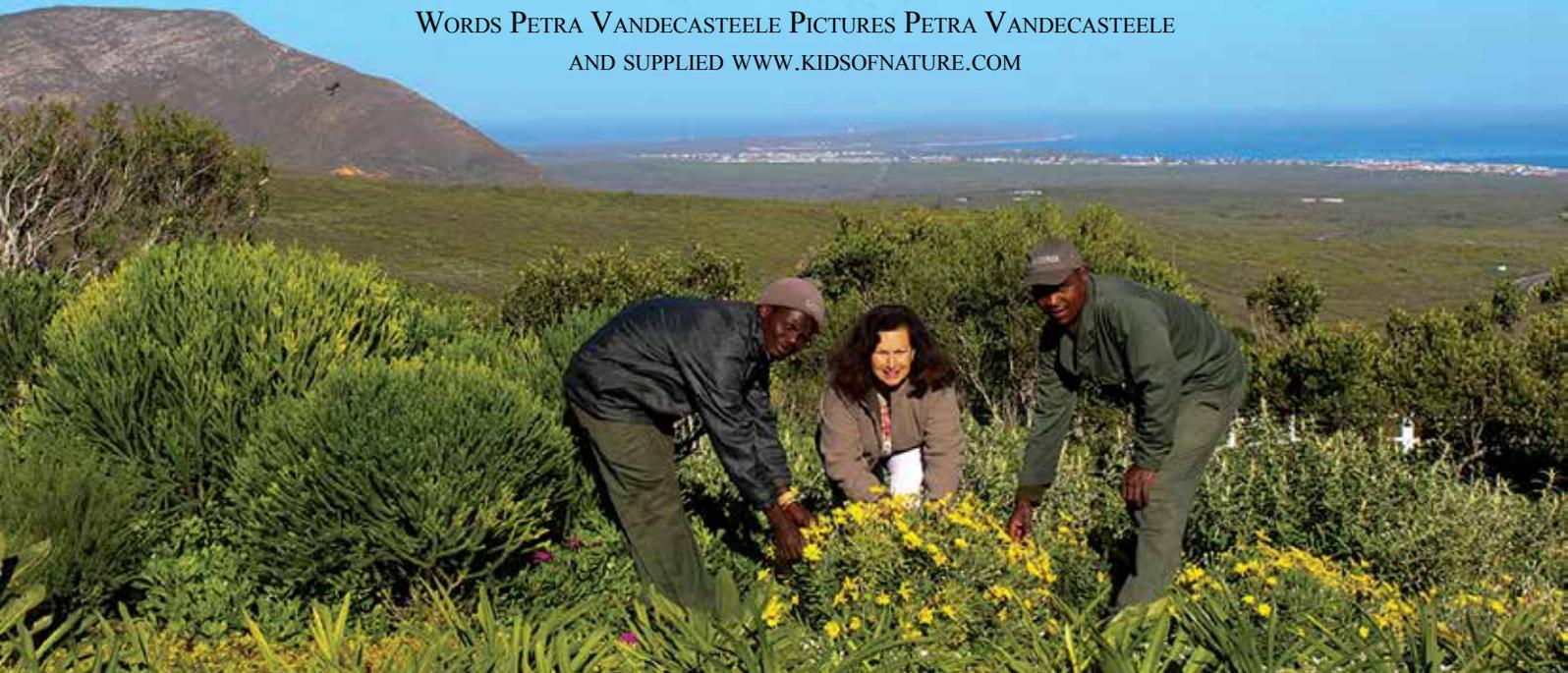


# The Greening of the Great Forest

On the Agulhas Plain of the Overberg, just two hours from Cape Town, the indigenous trees and fynbos at Grootbos Private Nature Reserve are receiving some very special attention

WORDS PETRA VANDECASTEELE PICTURES PETRA VANDECASTEELE  
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“Michael Lutzeyer is a true visionary,” a friend of mine said as we talked about green living. “You’ve got to meet him and visit Grootbos, his private nature reserve near Stanford. His team is running some really great projects there.”

I’m always on the lookout for sources of inspiration when it comes to mindful living, so it doesn’t take me long to visit the Grootbos Private Nature Reserve, a mere two hours from Cape Town. Situated on the

Agulhas Plain – in the heart of the beautiful Cape fynbos lowlands – the reserve covers an area of 2 500ha. It’s home to the critically endangered Overberg sandstone fynbos, the rare Agulhas limestone fynbos, endangered milkwood forests, as well as afromontane forests, Overberg dune strandveld and wetland vegetation.

In 1991, when Michael and his father, Heiner, bought the original 123ha Grootbos Farm (‘big forest’ in Afrikaans), they embarked on an extraordinary journey of discovery into the world of biodiversity. The farm was named after the three large forests

of primarily milkwood trees on the reserve. Some trees are up to 800 years old and boast a canopy spanning more than 15 metres. The reserve is also home to a huge diversity of beautiful indigenous fynbos.

Over a period of more than 10 years, 765 species have been recorded on just 1 800ha, mostly by Heiner who soon became an avid photographer and relentless fynbos explorer. He discovered important range extensions, many rare and threatened species, and no less than six species previously unknown to science. In recognition of his contribution to the



OPPOSITE PAGE: Joan Carboni and some of her team on the fynbos-filled plains of Grootbos Private Nature Reserve. THIS PAGE TOP LEFT: her team. Itatisto et aut es solorit fugiant, tem. Am ut velic tem sa core, omnihilis iustrupiet molor sequis aliqui officitiaera soles quid quam qui reperro ellacea expla que inullectatem quasped ipsaped ut quo exeratenihit et, aut venita il ilicabo repreni sciisitisto tescipsam dis et

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conservation of Cape flora, the Botanical Society of South Africa awarded Heiner the Flora Conservation Award in 2008. Together with Sean Privett, award-winning botanist and fynbos conservationist, Heiner also produced the *Field Guide to the Flora of Grootbos Nature Reserve and the Walker Bay Region*.

On the terrace of the reserve’s Garden Lodge, where there is splendid scenery that extends to Walker Bay, Michael passionately shares his views on preserving this beautiful part of the Cape. “There’s a tremendous amount of human pressure on the land, and we need to find ways to turn conservation into a viable solution. It’s not just about our natural heritage, but about the well-being of the people living here. The bottom line is that fynbos, however special, needs to earn its keep. And it’s up to us to find effective ways to deliver sufficient financial returns from our indigenous flora, rather than from farmed or developed land. Natural resources need to be made more accessible to all. The resources are provided by nature, we just need to create value.”

Sean Privett, conservation manager and director of the Grootbos Foundation, played a pivotal role in the establishment of the 12 500ha Walker Bay Fynbos Conservancy, and finds fynbos a tough subject.

“International visitors usually want to see the Big Five, which we don’t have,” he says. “So, here we help people to slow down, and many of our guests stay here because of a strong interest in gardening and in landscaping with indigenous flora.”

Joan Carboni, award-winning landscape designer and head of the landscaping department at Grootbos, adds, “We love sharing ideas on what you can do with a plant from a design angle. Often people think fynbos is nothing more than bushveld and I like to highlight what type of wildlife it attracts, or how you can enjoy the extras that come with it, by using it in the bathroom or by cooking with it. Fynbos can look really beautiful in a structured way by playing with its texture, shade, and colour.”

Sean explains that fynbos may be hard to grow outside its soil of origin, but the plants available from nurseries are the ones that





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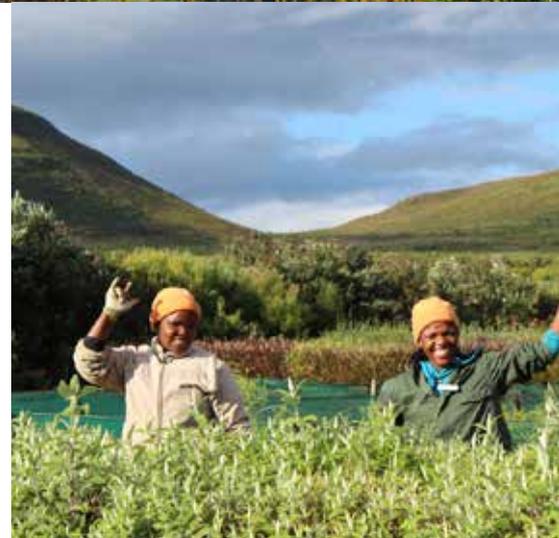
will do well. “In Germany and the UK there are many nurseries that stock fynbos, the most popular the pelargoniums, irises and watsonias,” he says.

Certainly it’s a pleasure to stroll through the various gardens on the reserve. Sean’s extensive knowledge of fynbos and its ecology, combined with Joan’s design talent and a team of 11 well-trained gardeners, has turned every corner into a delight. “Make no mistake,” says Joan with a grin, “this has been quite a learning curve. It’s all about working with plants that occur naturally instead of trying to force something, and then see it die anyway after two years.” Sean adds that gardening with fynbos makes sense, especially in areas that struggle with water shortage. Indigenous plants just work so much better for water-wise gardening. But where do you find knowledgeable fynbos gardeners?

In 2003, the Grootbos Foundation launched Green Futures, a horticultural and life skills college that has, as an offshoot, an indigenous plant nursery. At the time, there wasn’t a course available to train

unskilled and unemployed people from the local communities in fynbos landscaping, horticulture and ecotourism. So the Grootbos team designed one themselves and today about 80 per cent of its graduates earn a living from their natural heritage, either at Grootbos or elsewhere. Whenever Joan works on a landscaping project, she sources the plants from the Green Futures nursery. “I work out what I will need for my next project, so that the Green Futures nursery can prepare for it, and then Grootbos buys it from them.”

In 2009, the Grootbos Foundation launched another project, Growing the Future. “Guests started asking where our food came from and this made us realise that we could actually use the Green Futures model to train a group of women to grow food organically and sell it to Grootbos,” says Sean. “Today, 25 per cent of our kitchen requirements are sourced from Growing the Future, and each week our kitchen buys 20-30 trays of herbs and micro-veggies which are hugely popular with our guests. And so is our honey.”



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As we drive to the project’s operational hub, on a dusty track through radiant fynbos, I learn that Growing the Future currently produces 1 ton of honey per year from 80 hives. “But here, too, there were quite a few challenges before we could confidently teach others how to grow good food, and about what makes money and what doesn’t, what grows well in this soil and what doesn’t,”



Sean says. “We’re probably in one of the worst places to grow food: gale-force winds, bad soil, and ravaging porcupines and buck. And when you try to breed chickens, they get eaten by hawks. We tend to have a romanticised idea of farming. I tried to live off the land myself for several years, and have come to the conclusion that it’s easier to go to work and buy the food. If I had to be a farmer and feed my family, we would all have died by now!”

For our breakfast, a group of children collect free-range eggs from the coop and cheerfully share them for all to enjoy.

Afterwards I head for the stables to explore the reserve on horseback, especially wonderful when the *Erica irregularis* is in bloom. From May to August, it dominates 5km<sup>2</sup> of the reserve, the only place in the world where it occurs. Our guide, Breyton Basson from the African Horse Company, leads us on narrow sandy trails over fynbos-covered hills with superb views over Walker Bay. His horses seem as keen as we are to take on the white dunes and enjoy a gallop on the beach, which is not just exhilarating but lets us catch a glimpse of whales, dolphins and seals.

After a three-hour ride, I return to the lodge and savour a last cappuccino on the terrace before hitting the road. But I don’t leave Grootbos empty-handed. Their Future Trees programme aims to restore the forest by replanting some 10 000 milkwood saplings over the next decade, and I’m pleased to be part of it as I take mine to plant in my fynbos garden back home. ■

**Map reference G2 see inside back cover**

## Fynbos Facts

- Fynbos means ‘fine bush’ and is a unique vegetation that accounts for more than 80 per cent of the plant species in the Cape Floral Kingdom.
- More than two-thirds of these plant species are not found growing naturally anywhere else in the world.
- Although three times smaller than the UK, the Cape Floral Kingdom has six times more plant species and 290 times more endemic species.
- Fynbos has exceptionally high numbers of localised species, often restricted to a single, small area, sometimes less than 1km<sup>2</sup>.
- Most fynbos species need fire at certain intervals to reproduce and survive. The optimal fire cycle for fynbos is between 10-14 years. Shorter cycles can wipe out slow-maturing species, while species start dying during longer intervals.

## Handy Contacts

Grootbos Private Nature Reserve  
028 384 8000 [www.grootbos.com](http://www.grootbos.com)

Sean’s Privett’s fynbos blog  
[www.fynboshub.co.za](http://www.fynboshub.co.za)

The Grootbos Foundation:  
[foundation@grootbos.co.za](mailto:foundation@grootbos.co.za)

The **white milkwood** (*Sideroxylon inerme*) is protected in South Africa, and three specimens have been proclaimed national monuments: the Post Office Tree in Mossel Bay, the Treaty Tree in Woodstock, Cape Town, and the Fingo Milkwood Tree near Peddie in the Eastern Cape.