



Try The Truly African way of Landscaping.

The current mainstream approach to landscaping in South Africa still has its roots in the Western European model. The general approach is a beautiful garden full of flowers with straight lines, small variety and trimmed edges. In other words, dynamic exterior decoration that is pleasing to the eye, but high maintenance and to a large extent, sterile. (There are, of course, exceptions like the British meadow garden).

The challenge is to look at landscape design from an African perspective. Many of us still live in an environment that is (potentially) full of life – birds, geckos, snakes, bats and the list goes on depending where you live.

Currently landscapes are designed in the most unfriendly way possible for these creatures. Many cultivated plants used in landscapes are sterile and do not produce nectar or seeds. We feed and trim to create the lush look – some even throw in a palm tree just to be sure. And when the Ten Plagues hit us, we pull out the poisons. That makes the garden even more sterile.

Why don't we let Nature dictate what should be considered in South African landscapes? The landscapes in South Africa can easily be extensions of Nature. Imagine if the whole area (or even an industrial park) adapts this approach – the landscapes will teem with life and we do not need to drive kilometers to see nature in its natural state – it could be just outside our building.

So where do we start? Let us first look at the factors that should be considered when planning an outdoor piece of Nature:

A very important point of departure: Embrace your local vegetation and start from there.
The Highveld hues in winter are shades of yellow or dull red, not evergreen carpets.

Use plants that are well adapted to the local climate

Wherever possible, use plants that occur locally. Just be careful because the term “local” is often loaded. For instance, if you live on the Witwatersrand, you cannot just read “Wildflowers of the Gauteng area” and compile a wishlist for the landscape. You must make sure of your specific habitat (ridge, low lying, frost free etc.) and that will dictate the plants suitable for your specific environment.

Use plants that can survive on local rainfall

This is what we should strive for in landscapes. Unfortunately, rainfall is very erratic, so there may be times when watering will be necessary, but that should be kept to a minimum. Irrigation can be

handy to supply the erratic shortfall. But beware that it also creates the temptation to water too frequently.

The current drought really drives this point home and be assured, it is going to get worse before it gets better.

Low maintenance

In Nature, nobody maintains the vegetation so that it may look good. It may be trimmed by frost, drought and wild animals, but this is fairly minimal (excluding overgrazing). Try to mimic this in landscapes. Mind you, you have to pretend that you are a browser from time to time. Also note that nobody tills the soil or pick up the leaves.

Plants are resistant to diseases

It is seldom that plants in their natural habitat are destroyed by pests or diseases. They grow fairly slowly and there is seldom nice green shoots that can be attacked. If it happens, there are many insects that can't wait for a juicy meal. However, one must also remember that if you want to enjoy butterflies, you will have to accommodate caterpillars. By the way, birds also enjoy them.

Most plants in Nature serve more than one function.

Plants do not operate independently in Nature. There is always interaction with other creatures. For example, a tree can provide food, shelter and nesting sites for birds. A rock can protect trees from the ravages of fire, provide shelter for scorpions and sunbathing for lizards.

It must also be remembered that in Nature we find open spaces, shady areas, wet spots and dry spots. This can all be incorporated into a truly African design.

To summarise:

We want to create landscapes that function with the minimum (human) interference but are a haven for wildlife as well. Such a landscape can consist of many smaller habitats, for instance a shade area, a dry area or a grassland. Independent of the habitat that you create, water in a landscape is an essential element. For instance, many birds can source seeds and berries in our landscapes and surrounds, but clean water is not that readily available or accessible.

Irrespective of the size of the water supply, it is important that the water source must be in a protected spot where the birds can feel safe or that they can flee to a safe haven in close proximity. If it is just a bird bath, put it close to a shrub or small tree that the birds can use it as a landing strip from where they can assess possible dangers before they indulge. If the birds don't feel safe in the environment, they will not utilise it.

How should such a landscape be maintained?.

A good starting point is to do as little as possible.

Leaves that have fallen to the ground should just stay there. It is a safe hiding place for many creatures where they can overwinter. It includes lizards and frogs and many other bugs. These bugs are a great food source for birds in a period where food is hard to come by. If the leaf blanket is too

thick in a specific area (like directly under trees) spread them evenly in the landscape. Come the rainy season, these leaves will turn into mulch. This mulch is a great source of food for earth worms and the mulch will disappear within a few months.

Never till the soil. Soil behaves like skin and should stay intact. The only exception is when you prepare a bed for the first time.

Only prune when absolutely necessary. In Nature, pruning is done by fire, drought and browsers, but I am sure that a keen contractor could produce a neater job. But the effect should be the same.

Water as sparingly as possible. Most plants in our landscapes are killed by kindness, not by a lack of it. Unless you have planted the water gobblers that will give you a nice colour display for a few weeks.

The enormous variety of indigenous plants suitable for landscaping in South Africa is still underestimated and to a large extent unexplored for landscaping purposes. Is it possible to break away from the comfort zone of a few indigenous plants that are overused to a more creative way of using our own beauties?

The following is some examples from the summer rainfall area.

Crossandra greenstockii



This beautiful little perennial sprouts from an underground rootstock and has a very long flowering season. It prefers a sunny spot. Flower size can be quite variable. There is also a stunning apricot coloured variety that occurs on the `Highveld.

***Heteropyxis natalensis* (Lavender tree)**



This tree is always beautiful. Without flowers, as in the picture, the white-speckled stem is attractive. When the new leaves appear in spring, they are a fresh lemon-green. If the leaves are crushed, you will know where the common name comes from. It is a small to medium sized tree that is suitable for a small area.

***Mundulea sericea* (Corkbush)**



This beautiful shrub can flower twice in one season and is quite spectacular when in flower. It prefers a sunny spot and will tolerate some frost.

***Eucomis pallidiflora* (Giant pineapple lily)**



It prefers a sunny spot and a heavy soil, or even a damp area. The picture was taken near Chrissiesmeer where they grow in a temporal wetland. As a cutflower, they last for three months in a vase.

***Scadoxus puniceus* (Blood lily)**



To see them in flower in Nature is an unforgettable experience. They prefer semi shade and treat them the same way you would succulents. Too much attention kills them, but they thrive on neglect.

If you are really interested to Africanise your garden, the SANBI website www.plantzafrika.com is a good place to start. You are also welcome to contact the author at 082-801-1741 or at www.wildflownursery.co.za