Strong and resilient Jilian Abrahams and her partner Maria Williams are the essence of this project. Residents of Melkhoutfontein Village just off the R305 to Stilbaai, they face life with patient tenacity.

The Melkhoutfontein Kweker concept was devised by Rhett Hiseman of Cape Nature’s Riversdale Office. Arguing that the ever-accelerating scale of residential development offers opportunities other than construction, Rhett believes we can preserve our natural heritage, educate and create small-business opportunities in the process. Impossible? Never. Enough intention fuelled by dedicated attention makes miracles. Rhett recruited Jilian and Maria, negotiated with the Municipality for a suitable site and followed through by securing funding for an upliftment project with a sponsorship from Achievement Awards CC. The outcome: “plant rescue” becomes the Melkhoutfontein Kwekery. Conceptually simple: A residential development is approved - the construction crew stakes out the building footprint - the nursery team pays a site visit, identify and remove plants from the footprint. The “rescued” material is bagged and cared for at the nursery. On completion of construction the owner or appointed landscaper sources plants from the nursery to rehabilitate the site. Plant rescues are performed under a Plant Rescue Permit issued to the Melkhoutfontein Kwekery CC by Cape Nature. Excess plants are sold to the public. In practice: Challenging at best and frightfully frustrating at worst.
To the advantage of the fledgling enterprise are water availability, generous size and convenient situation of the site - at the entrance to Melkhoutfontein Village. The nursery has financial responsibility for water usage and a nominal annual rental. Jillian and Maria attend to the project in their spare time. Both women have families and are in full-time employment as part of the Rooikrans Team of the municipal alien eradication programme. Project time is limited to after work and weekends. Jillian’s husband Klaas gives a welcome hand when fishing is slow and three other locals are attached to the project. Long-term plans aim to involve local youngsters in growing, maintaining and eventually taking responsibility in sustaining the project. Passionate about plants, Jillian and Maria have extensive local plant knowledge and hone their skills as CREW volunteers. They are proficient at spotting exceptional specimens – such as several stunning specimens of *Morea macronyx* (well “out of range” – identified by Jan Vlok) in full flower on the nursery site at the time of our visit. That same weekend Maria spotted *Babiana ringens* (Rotstert) in flower at a site where they had been absent for a very long time.

Stilbaai BotSoc member, Janet Naude provided extensive guidance during the project’s setting up and stays in touch. Initial training included a SANBI propagation course at the Kirstenbosch Estate. Keen local enthusiasts support with practical training e.g. growing Pincushions and propagating Proteas from seed, the latter effort with surprising success evidenced by thriving bagged seedlings.

Funders, Achievement Awards CC handled registration formalities and signage. The nursery is registered as Melkhoutfontein Kwekery CC and has its own branding. The women’s original drawing for a poster is incorporated into the artwork designed and donated by Achievement Awards CC for their logo on letterheads, signage and marketing materials.

Jillian and Maria have no illusions about the challenges ahead. In the short term Jillian is eager to exploit holiday seasons to boost trade by advertising in the regional press and other media to attract seasonal residents and casual visitors. Immediate and serious constraints are a lack of on-site ablution facilities and not having someone in attendance full-time. Nevertheless perseverance rules the day. Jillian and Maria are determined and committed to the long-term success of their venture. We give them a Jewels of the Garden Route thumbs up.

All photos by Bob McIntyre.