Alerted to this tranquil Knysna gem by a fellow member before the devastating drought hit our coastal regions, her enthusiastic description never left my mind and as fortune would have it a few calls during the dry period actually never found Ina Engelbrecht at home. By late January 2011 after we’d been blessed with good rains Ina and I finally got together – and at a very appropriate time – The Year of Forests.

Ina purchased the property in 2000 and in 2001 acquired the adjacent erf. The conventional garden around the house, inherited from the previous owners, contains several large lush-looking Streitizia nicolai specimens and the inevitable Bougainvillea and Hibiscus cultivars and is maintained by a gardening service. Ina recalls with a smile the gardening service’s difficulty in accepting the fact that flowers are not required and only some weeds are weeds. The indigenous Arboretum stretches below this garden. The transition between the two sections is softened with natural grasses and shrubs which has the magical effect of suddenly finding oneself in this very special forest.

Relocating to Knysna in 2003, Ina found the new erf badly infested with alien trees and vegetation – Wattle, Lantana and Pereskia, dominating. Clearing took weeks of work after the move. This was followed by a succession of both alien weeds and indigenous pioneer species, the latter reinforcing her resolve to create her own little forest on the lower portion of the land. Coming from the North local tree species was an unknown quantity. A garden club talk on reforestation projects by well-known local indigenous tree specialist, Trevor Blamire, provided her with just the right opening to the fascinating world of local indigenous trees. Trevor supplied and planted Ina’s first trees in January 2004. They arrived complete with detailed do’s and don’ts. Ina was taught soil preparation techniques and the concept of planting close together. The latter promotes the rapid formation of closed canopy which is protected by the Forestry Act. Purist when it comes to Southern Cape trees Trevor refused to plant the Harpephyllum caffrum and Doyvalis caffra (bought in ignorance to use as a buffer along a boundary) as well as the Podocarpus henkelli – a gift in a pot. This episode led to Ina discovering J. Von Breitenbach’s book –Southern Cape Tree Guide (1985) - which in turn triggered her aim to collect as many of these trees as possible. By the end of 2007 Ina had acquired 99 of the 115 tree species in Von Breitenbach’s book found from George eastward. For the next two years the drought played havoc and her count was down to 94 trees. Finding the less common trees has been challenging, but with the help of keen nurserymen, ‘tree’ friends and the good rains between June and August 2010, Ina’s collection swelled to 103 thriving specimens (±210 planted in total).
Natural forest regeneration includes *Pittosporum viridiflorum*, *Vepris sp*, *Ochna serrulata*, *Burchellia bubalina* and forest margin shrubbery.

Maintaining the Arboretum is a labour of love for Ina and Lindile (Lesley) Ncedani who has been Ina’s right hand since inception of the project. The scourge of alien invasive vegetation is a fact of life that receives constant attention. To help remember names and for visitors’ convenience, trees and shrubs are labelled. Mimicking nature and maintaining the natural forest look while keeping a mix of dry and wet forest trees happy, calls for nothing short of devotion to the cause. Undeterred by challenges, cheerful and totally committed to the project, Ina and Lindile walk me along the named, bark-chipped pathways, Lindile quickly spotting and straightening a ‘leaning’ tree label. Ina and Lindile have through their handiwork acquired an impressive store of skill and knowledge - generously shared with those interested.

Magnificently rich in variety, with an inviting and soothing ambience, Ina’s Arboretum has broad appeal among newcomers to the area, garden clubs, tree and forest enthusiasts, specialists and novices alike. A truly significant Jewel of the Garden Route and a meaningful tribute to the Year of Forests.

All photos by Ena McIntyre