Jewels of the Garden Route

The Gemini team – people with a passion for plants

by Ena McIntyre

Starting out as a nursery assistant in the ‘pot plants section’ of a large retail nursery to running a thriving garden service takes courage, dedication, great effort and lots of patience – but when that’s your dream you do what you have to do. For Alice Strydom from the ‘pot plants section’ to today’s Gemini amounted to a 20 year apprenticeship!

Alice Strydom and I met during the late 1990s by which time she had worked her way from the shop floor via the cash desk to a position in sales and marketing at a large wholesale indigenous nursery. This position provided ample scope to expand her plant knowledge, gain experience in propagation and give expression to her inborn love of plants. This gift stood her in good stead in marketing – inspiring customers to buy plants simply came naturally. Her experience finally enabled her to step out on her own, very well-equipped for tackling her dream.

By 2002 she was thoroughly versed in a suite of essential skills for the task ahead – plant species knowledge, propagation and care, sales ability and handling admin, cash and customer relations. While still employed at the indigenous plant nursery, Alice’s sharp eyes spotted the pink ‘sport’ of *Barleria repens* amongst the multitude of plants. Her discovery triggered the cultivation of the popular hybrid *Barleria repens* ‘Tickled Pink’ which has magenta pink flowers.

In 2002 Alice assembled her team and started off with a contract to maintain a large hotel garden. When a tender to upgrade the hotel surroundings included the maintenance component into the overall landscaping contract Alice, specializing in maintenance only, was unable to bid. Undeterred by this turn of events, she remained alert for any new tender opportunities and with her positive attitude and excellent track record, was awarded a course maintenance contract on a golf estate – needless to say the quality of the work caught residents’ attention. Husband Jeff joined the team and today their work sells itself, generating business purely by word of mouth. Their team has grown to 18 individuals who are as proud and passionate as Alice and Jeff about their work. Chatting with them it is evident that they know their jobs, love what they do and where they work – an environment where they constantly learn and remain inspired by Alice and Jeff, their clients and the beautiful surroundings. The Gemini team have an impressive client base and their work is impeccable.

Somewhat of a perfectionist, Alice regards every garden as her own and only the team’s very best is good enough. Her client’s private homes and golf course gardens remain a mixture of indigenous and exotic with a strong leaning toward hardy, brightly coloured, bold shaped exotics. Nature however, always has the last word and the devastating drought and critical water shortages of the past two years have played havoc with indigenous as well as those hardy drought tolerant exotics – nothing was spared. Indigenous gardens however recover well from adverse weather conditions and estate policy has been reviewed to accommodate a gradual switch to all indigenous. Alice’s extensive indigenous nursery experience puts her in an excellent position for handling such a switch. After the recent rains Alice’s one all-indigenous garden was an absolute joy to behold – inspiration for everyone to follow that route in future.

Alice and Jeff employ a team of 18 people, who are trained in all aspects of garden maintenance. Everyone a jewel of a very special kind.

Launch of Plants of the Klein Karoo

by Ena McIntyre

The full circle is completed. At the very same venue in Oudtshoorn that attendants of a SKEP launch of the vegetation map of the Klein Karoo requested a field guide to the plants of the Klein Karoo, we delivered the book in October last year. It took five years to do so. About 110 people attended the launch of Jan Vlok and Anne Lise Schutte-Vlok’s book *Plants of the Klein Karoo*. More than three hundred copies were purchased in one go! The message is clear: people are hungry for information about the plants of the Klein Karoo.

To make the book affordable for the intended market (ie the landowners and managers of the land), we requested sponsors for financial support. Despite the current economic crisis, sponsors were generous. The Botanical Society of South Africa was one of these prominent sponsors.

The best reward to the authors is to see how happy the people of the area are to have information on the ecology of the region and plant species present now readily available.

The recipe for veld conservation is simple. There needs to be an understanding of what the issues are about. This usually results in a more caring attitude of the landowners, who are then more amenable to doing something about the problem. The aim of the book is to inform and inspire people about the plants of the Klein Karoo, and we hear that it is already doing just that.

See review of *Plants of the Klein Karoo* on page 42.