

The Botanical Society of South Africa

Highlights of the Century

by **John Rourke**, former President of the Botanical Society of South Africa, with **Caroline Voget**, Editor

Two years after the Union of South Africa came into being there was a feeling of great optimism in the country. One of the manifestations of this was a desire among prominent citizens of Cape Town to establish a national botanic garden. On 9 March 1912, a public meeting was held to discuss the feasibility of this step. This was followed by the formation of a committee under Mr C.F.W. Struben to 'consider the formation of a National Botanical Society, to prepare details of a scheme for the establishment of a National Botanic Garden within the Peninsula, and to report to a subsequent meeting. Mr Struben endorsed the remarks of Mr Merriman as to not rely too much on Government aid and of the importance of enlisting the sympathies of the general public in this project.'

This was to be the beginning of the Botanical Society. To give an idea of the extent to which the citizens of Cape Town supported it, one only has to look at the initial Council formed shortly thereafter which consisted of some of the most prominent people in Cape Town.

Finding the place

A suitable place for a botanic garden was sought and it was Neville Pillans who persuaded Henry Harold Welch Pearson, the Professor of Botany at the South African College and one of the principal advocates of the need for a botanic garden, that the Kirstenbosch site was preferable from a horticultural point of view to the site on the Groote Schuur Estate near the hospital that Pearson originally favoured.

In the House of Assembly Sir Lionel Phillips, on 6 May 1913, moved that 'In the opinion of this house the Government should consider the advisability of setting aside a piece of ground at Kirstenbosch for the establishment of a National Botanical Garden'. Louis Botha, Prime Minister, eventually agreed to the proposal on condition that financial support through the proposed Botanical Society would underpin the viability of the garden.

Kirstenbosch takes shape

The Botanical Society was founded on 10 June 1913 and the National Botanic Garden of Kirstenbosch followed on 1 July 1913.

1913 to 1938



Henry Harold Welch Pearson, the first Director of the National Botanic Garden at Kirstenbosch whose aim was to further the collection, cultivation and systematic study of South Africa's plants. Photo: Kirstenbosch Archives.

"To encourage the inhabitants of South Africa to take an active part in the progress and development of the National Botanic Gardens at Kirstenbosch."

(The Journal of the Botanical Society of South Africa, 1915)

Professor Pearson was appointed the first Director of the National Botanic Garden.

In those early years, income over and above the meagre Government Grant and the Botanical Society donation was derived from selling firewood, soil and acorns. Volunteers from the Botanical Society, mostly women, helped to collect the acorns and firewood, which contributed 31 percent of the total revenue of the first seven years. It was the wholehearted support of the members of the Botanical

Society (in cash and kind), and the dedication and astonishingly hard work of the small garden staff, from Director to labourers, that laid the foundations of Kirstenbosch and enabled it to become the great botanical garden it is today.

On 2 September 1914 Lord de Villiers, the first President of the Botanical Society and first Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the National Botanic Gardens, died after only one year in office. He was deeply mourned by Pearson who proposed that a memorial to him be built in the shape of a Palladian temple. This white marble structure, designed by Herbert Baker and Franklin Kendall, was to have been built over Bird's Bath in the Dell. Fortunately it was never built, partly due to the war, and partly to the death of Pearson on 3 November 1916, just two years after de Villiers. All that remains are the architect's drawings which show how it would have resulted in Kirstenbosch becoming an English-style park instead of the natural garden it eventually became.

The Botanical Society instituted its own journal, *The Journal of the Botanical Society of South Africa*, in 1915 with Pearson as the editor. The journal published the annual report of the Society and kept members informed about what was happening at Kirstenbosch. It also published an interesting mix of articles relating to South African flora. Ninety-eight years later, it is still going as *Veld & Flora*. (See p. 60.)

After Pearson's death in 1916, there was a three-year hiatus when no formal director of the National Botanic Garden was appointed. The Botanical Society's representatives, William Duncan Baxter and Frank Cartwright (the Society's first Honorary Secretary) took on the running of Kirstenbosch until 1918 when Professor Robert Harold Compton arrived from Cambridge to take up office, having been released from war duties at the end of the First World War.

In 1938 the Silver Jubilee (twenty-fifth anniversary) of the Botanical Society was celebrated. About 600 members of the Society and distinguished overseas guests attended the annual Botanical Society



ABOVE: What might have been. Pearson's idea to build a Paddian memorial to Lord de Villiers who died in 1914, translated into architects drawings by Franklin Kendall and Herbert Baker.



ABOVE: In 1963, during the Kirstenbosch Jubilee, Neville Pillans showed John Rourke and Ted Oliver the spot where, at the end of Kirstenbosch Lane in Bishopscourt, he alighted from the cart with Harold Pearson, who then proclaimed, 'This is the place'. In the background you can see the Camphor Avenue and, under construction, the new road that would bypass Kirstenbosch. Photo: E.A.G. Oliver.

OUR NATIONAL FLORA.

NEED OF PRESERVATION.

SUGGESTED BOTANIC GARDEN.

MEETING IN THE CITY.

Interesting Speeches.

Yesterday morning a meeting was held in the Colonial Orphan Chamber, Church square, for the purpose of taking steps to establish a National Botanic Garden in the Cape Peninsula. There was a large and influential attendance, including a number of ladies.

ABOVE LEFT: The notice for the meeting as it appeared in the Cape Times on 10 March 1912.

Acorn Account
MARCH, Cash Account.

Dr.					Cr.
6/3	60	buys	9	7	6
20	70	do	10	15	9
27	100	do	15	12	6
27	100	do	15	12	6
6	100	do	15	12	6
7	100	do	15	12	6
14	100	do	15	12	6
20	200	do	30	24	6
					£35.18.9. <i>P. J. de la Haye</i>
					£75.2.9. <i>P. J. de la Haye</i>
20	100	do	15	12	6
27	100	do	15	12	6
31	100	do	15	12	6
					(from 29.8.0.)
					(- 25.6.8)
					(- 209.9.5)
					£46.17.6 <i>P. J. de la Haye</i>
31/3	100	do	15	12	6
7	100	do	15	12	6
14	100	do	15	12	6
20	100	do	15	12	6
					£78.2.6
	1500	buys			
					£78.2.6 <i>P. J. de la Haye</i>

ABOVE RIGHT: Pearson's Cash Account book showing the 'Acorn Account'. In the early years, income over and above the Government Grant and the Botanical Society donation was derived from selling firewood and acorns.



ABOVE: Presentation to Mr and Mrs J.W. Mathews on the occasion of Mr Mathews's retirement, 20 April 1936. (l-r): C.J. Sibbert, L.Bolus, F.W. Metelerkamp, Mrs Mathews, J.W. Mathews, R.H. Compton, W. Duncan Baxter, James Rose-Innes, D. Bennie Hewat.

'At Home' gathering at Kirstenbosch to listen to speeches by various dignitaries including J.C. Smuts the Minister of Justice. (See photo on p. 66). In his speech, Compton emphasized the fact that Kirstenbosch was now an internationally recognized academic institution that had contributed significantly to 'the history of the collection, cultivation and systematic study of plants all over the world'.

Membership of the Society had risen from 352 in 1913 to 1928 members by the end of 1938. Despite the interruption of the Second World War, the Botanical Society continued to show a steady rise in members for the next twenty five years. Although its primary function was still to support the National Botanic Gardens of Kirstenbosch and its satellite Karoo Garden, the Society began to flex its wings somewhat with the establishment of the Wild Flower Protection Section that was concerned with broader conservation issues. However, it was still tied to the National Botanic Gardens in that all the presidents of the Society at this time were also Chairmen of the Board of the National Botanic Gardens.

The running of the Botanical Society was in the hands of its very competent Honorary Secretaries for the first 50 years. Theodora Amphlett was the first, followed by Frank Cartwright from 1915 to 1919, and then Louisa Bolus from 1920 to 1924. From 1925 Frank Cartwright returned to the post until L. A. Solomon took over after Cartwright became ill in 1942. In 1947 Wyn Hall was elected to the post, and continued as Hon. Secretary until 1963 when she was killed in a car accident during the Kirstenbosch Jubilee celebrations that year. The administrative work of the Society had been carried out in private homes and offices until 1949 when the Botanical Society moved into its own purposely built office at Kirstenbosch. This is the same building its Head Office occupies today.

Growing wildflowers

Persuading South Africans to learn how to grow indigenous flowers was one of the Society's principle objectives. Articles on how to cultivate indigenous plants appeared regularly in *The Journal of the Botanical Society of South Africa* and visits to members' gardens, complete with tea and scones, became very popular.

On 8 October 1955, the Botanical Society held its first Wild Flower Show at Kirstenbosch, an event that was to prove most popular well into the 1990s. All exhibits were grown by members in their own gardens, many from seed distributed by Kirstenbosch.

1939–1963



The Flower Market in Trafalgar Place, Adderley Street, Cape Town in the 1950s. For decades the Botanical Society, through the Wildflower Protection Section of the Society, sought to restrict the unsustainable harvesting of wildflowers from the veld.

"To promote the preservation of the Native Flora of South Africa, to encourage public interest in it, and to co-operate with the Public Authorities and others in the attainment of this object."

(The Journal of the Botanical Society of South Africa, 1940)

For many years, an allocation of seed of indigenous flora was distributed to all members of BotSoc. This was initiated as a way of saying thank you to members of the gardening public who generously gave plants to the newly established Kirstenbosch Garden and who often requested a little something for their gardens in return. After 2000 this extremely popular benefit of membership of the Society was curtailed as commercial nurseries supplying live plants filled that role. Thus one of the objectives of the Society had been met.

Environmental education

Louisa Bolus spearheaded the campaign for child and adult education in the Botanical Society mainly through the medium of publications and field identification guides. Her educational articles in the

Society's journal were appreciated by many members. The publication of *Wildflowers of the Cape of Good Hope* in 1951 was the Society's first venture in producing wildflower guides. Priced at 50 shillings, over 10 000 copies were sold. Other wildflower guides followed, including the re-printing of *Wild Flowers of the Cape Peninsula* by Mary Maytham Kidd which has recently been revised yet again, and is still the best wildflower guide on the flora of the Cape Peninsula.

Wildflower protection

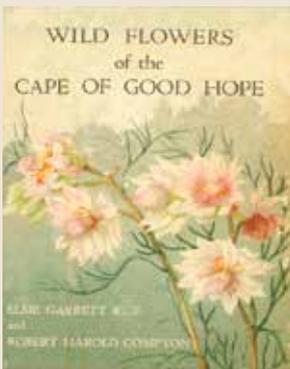
In 1938 the Constitution of the Society was revised in order to establish a new section to deal with 'Wild Flower Protection'. This new section took over the work of the Wild Flower Protection Society that had been started by the Mountain Club as early as 1912 and which had published *Nature Notes*, edited by Louisa Bolus and illustrated by Dorothy Barclay. It was involved in the promulgation of laws against the unsustainable harvesting of wildflowers and also in prosecuting wildflower pickers, sellers (hawkers and nurseries) and firewood collectors. Wildflower Ordinances were promulgated and lists of protected flowers published, but enforcement of these laws proved difficult 'as the beauty of our flowers seems to overcome any scruples which our womenfolk have in buying them at the door.' (*The Journal of the Botanical Society of South Africa* p. 16.) The services of an ex-police officer were sought and paid for by the Society. In 1951 the law-enforcing function of the Section was absorbed into the newly formed Department of Nature Conservation of the Western Cape.

Although the emphasis of this Section Committee was on wildflower protection, increasingly the opinion of the Botanical Society was sought on other issues such as the establishment of nature reserves, the construction of roads and the closure of the quarries on Table Mountain. The Botanical Society also saw fit to raise money for a 'Control of Alien Vegetation Committee' funded via the Wild Flower Protection Section. Hack groups were formed and a booklet, *Green cancers of South Africa*, was published alerting the public to the threat of alien invasive plants to South Africa's indigenous vegetation.

In the early 1950s, Edith Stephens, a member of the Council of the Botanical Society and lecturer in Botany at the University of Cape Town, bought a tract of land known as 'Isoetes Vlei' on the Cape Flats, near the present Mitchells Plain, with help from members of the Society and donated it to the National Botanic



ABOVE: The elegant Garden Party on the lawn of Kirstenbosch to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Kirstenbosch. Over 1000 guests were addressed by the State President, C.R. Swart.



ABOVE: *Wild Flowers of the Cape of Good Hope* was the Society's first venture into producing wildflower guides. It was published in 1951, written by Robert Harold Compton and illustrated by Elsie Garrett Rice, and proved immensely popular.



ABOVE RIGHT: Extremely competent Honorary Secretaries ran the Society's administration. Wyn Hall was the Hon. Sec. from 1947 until 1963 when she was killed in a car accident during the Kirstenbosch Jubilee celebrations.

ABOVE: Visits to Botanical Society members' gardens were an important part of the Society's Social calendar as evidenced by this notice in the 1957 issue of its journal.



ABOVE: Edith Stephens attending one of the Botanical Society's popular Wild Flower Shows in 1954.



ABOVE: A major event was the construction of the Botanical Society's own office at Kirstenbosch in 1949. The photo shows Wyn Hall on the stoep of the office in the 1950s.

Gardens. She was concerned about the degradation and loss of habitats on the Cape Flats, and although it was maintained, nothing more was done with it for decades due to the paralysing effect of apartheid. However, years later it was to provide an opportunity in post-apartheid Cape Town to establish the valuable Edith Stephens Wetland Park for the local community and thus prevent the loss of yet another valuable remnant of the original vegetation of the Cape Flats.

The end of the first fifty years of the Botanical Society of South Africa saw membership up to 3 807. The Kirstenbosch Jubilee in 1963 was celebrated with functions that included an exhibition of 'Kirstenbosch Past and Present', a garden party on the lawn, and a 'wreath-laying ceremony' in full academic regalia at the grave of the first Director, Harold Pearson, an international flower show in the City Hall of Cape Town, the hosting of fifty visiting botanists from all over the world and many others, all enthusiastically supported by the Botanical Society of South Africa.

Asserting independence

From 1936 until 1974 (a period of 38 years) the President of the Botanical Society was also the Chairman of the Board of the National Botanic Gardens. This relationship inevitably spawned tensions between the two bodies. Likewise, from inception, the *Journal of the Botanical Society of South Africa* had always been edited by the Director of the National Botanic Gardens. It tended to reflect their viewpoint rather than a Botanical Society one. This, together with delays in the publication after 1963, led to more tension between the two organizations that a change in format in 1963 did not help. In 1975, the Director of the National Botanic Gardens became an advisory editor of the Botanical Society's journal, and a paid professional editor was appointed, guided by a Botanical Society-appointed editorial committee. It took on a new name, *Veld & Flora*, and became an independent mouthpiece of the Botanical Society with the driving force of Lt Cdr Dick Geary-Cooke as Editor. In 1990 editorial ties were finally severed with the National Botanic Gardens (which had merged with the Botanical Research Institute to become the National Botanical Institute or NBI). Shirley Pierce-Cowling took over from Dick Geary-Cooke as editor, and was succeeded by Caroline Voget in 1992. The journal continues to fulfil its role as an independent, informative publication and is a year away from its one hundredth volume.

1964–2013



BotSoc's existing volunteer base make it an ideal partner to SANBI's Custodians of Rare & Endangered Wildflowers (CREW) project.

"It is our mission to win the hearts, minds and material support of individuals and organizations, wherever they may be, for the conservation, cultivation, study and wise use of the indigenous flora and vegetation of southern Africa"

(Veld & Flora, March 1990)

Funding for the Gardens

In 1954 the National Botanic Gardens was declared a 'state-aided institution' which meant that funding was more secure, even if limited. The Society continued to give its surplus funds to the National Botanic Gardens (80% after 1974). However, from 1991, funding for the Gardens was changed and this annual donation ceased. Instead, the Botanical Society Development Fund for the National Botanical Institute (NBI) came into being with specific projects being targeted for support. All donations and other monies surplus to the Society's needs (though not determined by a fixed percentage), were channelled to the National Botanical Gardens through the Development Fund.

In 2006 the NBI became the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) with additional responsibilities as well as increased funding from government. BotSoc had already begun to look beyond merely supporting the National Botanical Gardens, but it continues to support the Gardens today, through more strategic fundraising, volunteer activities and promotion. The BotSoc has entered into a formal partnership with SANBI, cemented by a Memorandum of Understanding between them. The Development Fund was changed to 'The Botanical Society's Partnership Fund'.

Administrative adjustments

As the Botanical Society of South Africa entered its second fifty years, membership growth increased to such an extent that a full-time paid secretary became necessary. Jean Harvey was the first full-time Secretary, who was succeeded in 1971 by Mieke Dysell, then Patricia Coley in 1975 and Danielle Law in 1984. In 1986 Head Office activities were separated from the local branches. A new Head Office post of Executive Secretary/Administrative Manager was created and filled by Daphne Barends. Dr Bruce McKenzie became the Society's first Director in 1996, followed by the appointment of Dave McDonald as Deputy Director in 2000. In 1996, the post of Executive Secretary fell to Zaitoon Rabaney, who was eventually to become the Executive Director of the Society in 2011.

Beyond the Garden fence

The 1960s saw the establishment of many regional branches of the Botanical Society or BotSoc as it was increasingly becoming known. The stories of these branches, the lifeblood of the Society, can be found on pages 79-118.

As the Society was increasingly drawn into giving advice on development proposals and environmental Impact assessments, it was decided to disband the Wildflower Protection Section Committee and the Alien Clearance Committee and merge them into a Flora Conservation Committee (FCC) in 1974. Wouter van Warmelo was appointed as the first full-time Conservation Liaison Officer. The FCC was extremely active and many projects were undertaken over the next few decades, including setting up an inquiry into the controversial Armscor plan to establish a test range at De Hoop, the now familiar Waterwise Campaign, an alien clearance and job creation pilot project that eventually grew into the Working for Water programme, and the Search and Rescue programme that was



FAR LEFT: The annual handing over of the BotSoc's financial contribution to the Kirstenbosch Board of Trustees was a much anticipated event. (l-r): Prof. Brian Rycroft (Director of the National Botanic Gardens), Dudley d'Ewes (Chairman of the National Botanic Gardens Board of Trustees), Jean Harvey (Secretary of the Botanical Society) and Mike Botha (Chairman of the Council of the Botanical Society).

LEFT: The author, Dr John Rourke, seated below a painting of Prof. Harold Compton at the very desk where Cecil John Rhodes signed the purchase agreement for the Kirstenbosch Estate from the Cloete family in 1895. On Rhodes's death in 1902, the land was bequeathed to the Nation, and on 1 July 1913 it became the Kirstenbosch National Botanic Garden. This desk has been procured by the Kirstenbosch Branch of BotSoc.



ABOVE: Money doesn't grow on trees. R3,5 million was raised through the Botanical Society towards the Conservatory at Kirstenbosch. BotSoc members who have contributed greatly to Kirstenbosch: (l-r) Mary Gould, Mary Mullins, Leslie Hill, Kay Bergh and Julian Ogilvie-Thompson.

the seed for the successful Custodians of Rare and Endangered Wildflowers (CREW) programme.

In the build up to the first democratic elections of 1994, BotSoc held a Strategic Planning Conference at which a new mission statement, that still holds today, was prepared. New and revitalized committees with dedicated and inspirational committee members, and new staff appointments (including Philip Ivey as Field Conservation Officer) set the Society on a course that was to culminate in the establishment of the impressive Cape Conservation Unit, which advised on national environmental legislation and identified projects that would feed into an overall conservation plan in the Cape and Succulent Karoo. This became the national Conservation Unit in 2004 run by Kristal Maze and Mark Botha. (See article on page 60.)

In 2005 the BotSoc won a *Mail & Guardian* Greening Award for biodiversity conservation, and a publication, *Mainstreaming Biodiversity*,

issued as a supplement to *Veld & Flora* in June 2005 contained a summary of their conservation achievements.

Spreading the word

There have been many valuable, often collaborative, education programmes run by the Society. One of the most popular was the creation of posters illustrating South Africa's major biomes, sponsored by Old Mutual, that were widely distributed to schools around the country.

As in the past, *Veld & Flora* is used as a means to assist teachers and reach children and scholars through supplementary publications like *Vygie* and relevant articles such as the popular 'Gardening with indigenous traditionally useful plants' series by Phakamani Xaba.

The Botanical Society embarked on a series of Wild Flower Guides from 1981 when *Namaqualand and Clanwilliam* was

published. Twelve superb guides were eventually produced covering much of the South African flora – many of them reprinted and revised several times and with over 100 000 copies sold, an amazing achievement. The series has been halted now, as more and more commercial publishers take on the task of producing similar guides.

Entering the digital age

In 1999, Ted Oliver, current President of the BotSoc, established the Society's first website. There have been many changes since, and the updated site now allows members to pay or renew their subscriptions online. BotSoc also has a Facebook page and many of the Branches too have their own websites and Facebook pages.

At the Society's 75th birthday, membership was up to 13 000. Today, one hundred years since its inauguration, membership hovers around the 20 000 mark. 🌱