



A special space comes to life

Just beyond the business district of Stellenbosch, on the edges of the residential area, is a large reserve, a space of activity and stillness.

The Jan Marais Nature Reserve is a gem, offering wide-open spaces to walk in, to play in and to enjoy indigenous trees and plants.

From a plant point of view, there's always something of interest. Right now the highlight of the garden is the many plectranthus beds, with their delicate flowers ranging from deep purples to various shades of mauve to white. There's a tiny, white-flowered ground cover that brings to mind lace, and a taller white one with large flowers. They're planted beneath the trees in the arboretum, along with some healthy-looking *Veltheimia brachiata*, the forest lily, a deciduous bulb that will flower in late winter.

This is the latest area to be planted, supervised by one of the reserve's guardians, retired entymology professor Jan Giliomee.

Most of the plectranthus plants come from cuttings from his garden, with a few from Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden.

"My wife is the gardener at home, this is where I garden," he says.

While Giliomee sits on the advisory board for the reserve, his involvement goes far beyond that.

"I'm here nearly every day, I stop by on my way to the office. I chat to people, supervise the two workers.

"When I officially retired 10 years ago, the park was looking neglected. It bothered me."

Giliomee decided something needed to be done about it. Lack of funds to develop the garden is a problem, but Giliomee managed to get a grant from the Jan Marais Trust to pay for two workers twice a week, irrigation, some plants, fencing to keep the grysbok from grazing on newly planted shrubs, and some compost.

The reserve dates back to 1915 when philanthropist Jan Henoeh Marais bequeathed £10 000 to Stellenbosch Municipality to establish a 23ha nature area. It is now a proclaimed nature reserve, managed by the Stellenbosch municipality.

There's a 1.7km perimeter walk, popular with joggers and hikers, and a grassy area for picnickers.

Johann le Roux, superintendent of nature conservation for the Stellenbosch municipality, looks after the natural area, about two thirds of the reserve. This is the only example of Boland Granite Fynbos and Swartland Shale Renosterveld left within the boundaries of Stellenbosch. A recent fire burned mainly old veld, but one area burned twice in a year and may need some help to regenerate, Le Roux says.

There are 150 plant species here, along with wildlife such as mice, hare, grysbok, mongoose, sunbirds, sugarbirds, guinea fowl and francolin. After the recent fire a decision was made not to remove the burnt plants, but to leave them as nature would. It's deliberate, but some people would prefer it to be "tidied".

The managed section of the reserve is divided into three areas, fenced to keep the bakkies out. Here you'll find beautiful proteas, leucadendrons, a large variety of ericas and pelargoniums, and a section of aloes.

"I thought I'd only want to plant protea species, but I decided to include some hybrids," says Giliomee. The Protea Repens (suikerbossie), a deep pink red protea, was "selected for", not hybridised.

"The proteas are best in June, the leucadendrons in August and September. There's always something interesting here."

An orange-breasted sunbird on an erica gives us a great show as it moves from flower to flower. "It gives me great pleasure to see that," says Giliomee.

He is responsible for all the name tags for the plants, as well as laminated boards with interesting facts about plants and nature. But these are often vandalised, and he's hoping to get more permanent boards.

The aloe garden is planted in what would have been the riverbed in a past age, and it's a difficult area.

"Even aloes need richer soil. They grow in areas with little rain where nutrients are washed away, so I have decided to add some manure here."

Giliomee points out an aloe marlothii. "It grew so tall in my garden and then fell down. I took the head and planted it, and it's doing well."

An old euphorbium looks as though it's been here a long time.

As part of his sprucing-up plan, Giliomee began obtaining sculptures for the garden. "I noticed two pieces at the university and asked the curator if I could have them, and he said yes. One is a Lippy Lipschitz, the other a Helmut Starcke. Then I obtained a few more. We have one by Herman Van Nazareth, called Exuberance."

Owl boxes have been installed to invite owls in, although squirrels have taken up residence in them.

There's a natural pond that forms in winter, in a marshy area near the labyrinth. The labyrinth is wonderful to walk, and was designed by Terry de Vries.

The reserve is a recreational and educational facility, and an eco-centre has just been opened, aimed at youth environmental education. The reserve now has full-time security, from 7am to 7pm, and no alcohol or open fires are allowed. Plans are afoot to establish a tea garden and an indigenous nursery in the kiosk.

Before you leave the reserve, look up at the stone pines. A curious collection of toys is strung high up between the trees, and you may wonder - how on earth did they get there? That's Giliomee's touch, and it brings a smile to his face as he tells the story of his attempt at installation art. - Cape Argus

* Contact the park at 021 808 8160 for group visits.

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