

IN BRIEF

- **WHAT:** Waylands Farm, a wildflower reserve that showcases the rich flora of the Western Cape.
- **WHERE:** Near Cape Town, South Africa.
- **SIZE:** 1,200 hectares (3,000 acres).
- **CLIMATE:** Mediterranean-type – warm, dry summers and mild, moist winters.
- **POINTS OF INTEREST:** Diverse flora sustained by farming practices that replicate nature.

Treasures of the veldt

John Hoyland visits a farm in South Africa where the owner's enlightened approach has helped to preserve one of the world's most spectacular displays of wildflowers. Photographs Claire Takacs

More than 1,200 native species thrive in the Western Cape, including orange *Spiloxene caniculata*, yellow *Dimorphotheca* and blue *Heliophila*.



FROM TOP: Nguni cattle graze the land until autumn; *Moraea tripetala* is a tough bulb with delicate flowers just 2cm wide; farmer John Duckitt proudly nurtures the native flora of the area; *Dimorphotheca sinuata* is widespread throughout the Western Cape in spring, and varies in colour from pale lemon to dark orange.



The fragrant magenta flowers of *Moraea tricolor* have yellow nectar guides on the outer tepals.

At the end of the 18th century Hildagonda Duckitt, a woman as formidable as her name might suggest, sent seeds from one of the wildflowers growing around her farm in South Africa to Suttons Seeds in Britain. The plant was *Diascia strumosa*, and this was the first time that it had been commercially available to European gardeners. Its appearance in seed catalogues opened up the extraordinary world of South African plants to the general gardener.

Hildagonda was spoiled for choice when deciding which seeds to send. She had the good fortune to live in an area with one of the highest densities of flowering plants in the world. The small town of Darling, 75km north of Cape Town, is home to more than 1,200 species, many of them endemic to that area. The plant communities Hildagonda would have known are still there. While plant habitats in other parts of the world are disappearing, those around Darling and in other parts of South Africa are thriving.

The survival of the enormous diversity and concentration of plants around Darling is due in large part to

Hildagonda's stewardship of the land, and that of her farming descendants. John Duckitt, the current custodian of the 1,200 hectare Waylands Farm, uses farming methods that mimic the conditions that originally caused the wildflowers to flourish. Before Europeans arrived in southern Africa the veldt was grazed by huge herds of migratory antelope, which would eat every plant down to the ground after it had flowered, fertilise the land and move on, leaving the plants to re-grow and re-flower. The herds of antelope have disappeared but John Duckitt and his fellow farmers now graze sheep and cattle in the same way. The animals are removed from the fields in the autumn, allowing flowers to grow unmolested. After the flowers have set seed, the animals return to graze on the nutritious plants. The result is one of the most extraordinary flowering spectacles in the world.

Rich grazing

The cattle that John raises are a traditional Nguni breed that have been farmed in Africa for hundreds of years. Their appearance seems

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Spiloxene caniculata is endemic to the Darling area and though an endangered species, it is thriving at Waylands Farm.

familiar, and it takes a few moments to realise why: these are descendants of the animals depicted in classic Egyptian manuscripts. They are gentle and beautiful beasts, and a perfect replacement for antelope. “They are tough and easy – perfect for the veldt, for maintaining the wildflowers,” says John. “They eat everything, leaving nothing for the bulbs to compete with. European cattle are choosy, so farmers have to sow grass for them, destroying the wildflowers.”

John Duckitt is a rugged bear of a man, an archetypal Afrikaner farmer with a friendly welcome for everyone and a knowledge of his farm's flora that is worthy of a botanical institute. His passion for plants seems greater than for his livestock, greater even than for his old Series 2 Land Rover. While we gaped in awe at the



Zantedeschia aethiopica stays evergreen when, as here, it grows in damp meadows.



Blue *Heliophila coronopifolia* lolls among elegant spires of a white *Trachyandra* species.



“A botanist once asked John to dig up a spadeful of soil: he counted 13 species of plant in it”

▷ swathes of *Zantedeschia* growing in damp meadows he pushed us on: “Get in the truck, there’s better plants: beautiful flowers I want you to see.”

And there were. Acres of annual *Dimorphotheca*, *Felicia* and *Diascia*, punctuated by taller *Ornithogalum* and underpinned by a profusion of jewel-like flowering bulbs. The abundance is dizzying, and it needs John to point out individual plants: blue *Babiana*, golden *Moraea*, pink *Lachenalia*, tiny *Ixia* and exotic *Geissorhiza*. He shows us clumps of the golden-flowered *Spiloxene caniculata*, an endangered species that, here, is not just clinging on but thriving. Next to it are the startling red and purple flowers of *Geissorhiza eurystigma*, found only around Darling. Most of the plants we see are new and exciting discoveries, to the photographer and to me. John recounts that a Japanese botanist once asked him to dig up a spadeful of soil:

“He couldn’t believe it – he counted 13 different species of plant in it. That’s something to be proud of, something to look after.”

Watching John on his knees pointing out the similarity between an endemic *Geissorhiza* and a *Babiana*, or folding back grasses so that our photographer can see a perfect specimen of *Moraea*, I wonder how he came to know so much about the plants. “I’m a farmer,” he shrugs. “We’ve been looking after this land and these flowers for generations.”

A proud heritage

In 1917 his great-grandfather Fred Duckitt, believing that one of the ways to preserve his floral heritage was to share it with others, joined other farmers in founding the Darling Flower Show, to present the flowers to a wider public. Today the show consists of landscaped displays of plants from the different habitats ▷

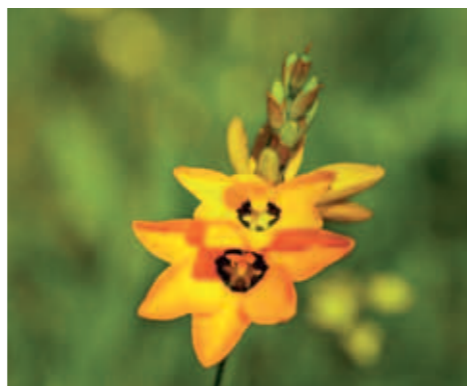


CENTRE: The twisted foliage of *Gethyllis ciliaris* will wither away before the plant flowers in summer. BOTTOM: *Babiana rubrocyanea* closely resembles other flowers of different genera – for example, *Geissorhiza radians* – which have evolved to compete for attention from the same pollinating insects.

John plans to remove this glade of alien, invasive *Acacia* trees, but for now they cast some shade on a dense mix of annuals and bulbs, dotted with *Zantedeschia aethiopicum*.



THIS PICTURE: This purple form of *Diascia capensis* bears flowers just 8mm wide.
TOP RIGHT: The corn lily (*Ixia maculata*) may be grown in milder parts of the UK.
BOTTOM RIGHT: The fading flowers of *Felicia heterophylla* resemble stars.



Seeing wildflowers

There is something of interest throughout the year in the Western Cape but the peak time is spring – August and September. Most flowers, particularly annuals, remain closed until the weather warms up, so the time to see them is between 11am and 3pm.

The best way to discover the wildflowers is in the company of a botanical guide, who will know the best places to see flowers on a particular day. On our visit to South Africa I had the services of a botanical guide, Karin Frehse, without whom we would have missed half of the flowers that we did see and certainly would not have known their names.

- To contact botanical guide Karin Frehse, email karinef@telkomsa.net, tel +27 21 557 7308.
- Specialised Personal Tours can organise botanical guides for visitors – contact Madelief Louw (email daisylo@mweb.co.za, tel +27 21 674 2664).

RECOMMENDED READING

If you are travelling by yourself, field guide books can help with identifying plants. The Botanical Society of South Africa produces a series of plant guides.

- *Wildflower Guide No 7: The West Coast* by John Manning and Peter Goldblatt (1998) covers the Darling area. www.botanicalsociety.org.za
- Although it is too bulky to carry around, *The Colour Encyclopedia of Cape Bulbs* by Peter Goldblatt, Dee Snijman and John C Manning (Timber Press, 2002) is a useful reference book.

▷ around the town. To help visitors identify the wonderful (and often weird) plants there are display tables where samples are labelled.

In 1938, as a result of the show's popularity, John's grandfather laid roads through the farm so visitors could see the flowers growing in the wild. These roads are still open and driving gives you a sense of the huge extent of the area in which the flowers grow. But don't stay in the car. You need to amble around and get down on your hands and knees to really appreciate the wonder of the place.

Natural harmony

Most of the plants are unfamiliar and would be hard to grow in Britain, other than as mollycoddled specimens in pots. As a gardener, the joy of seeing these plants is not just in realising that are still here and being nurtured, but also in seeing how they grow in the wild. Like many gardeners I believe that large plantings of a single plant are more effective than a confusion of different species. But here is the opposite: an excess of little treasures that harmonise into a beautiful whole. The

scale of it, and many of the species themselves, will not translate to the UK, but the abundance might. I'm planning a few square metres of carefully chosen plants that will remind me of the plenty and beauty of Darling.

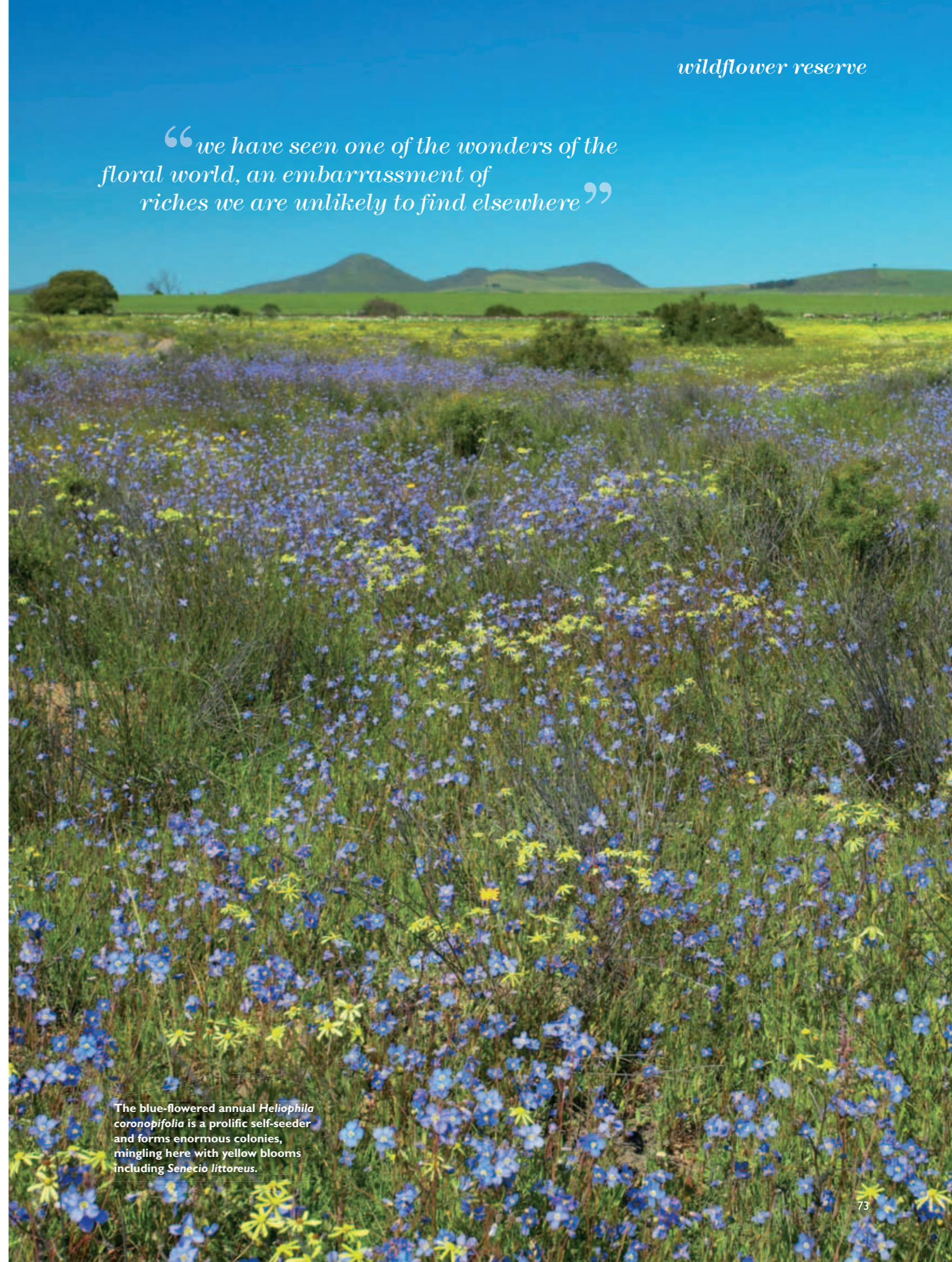
Our day began drinking tea and eating traditional *koeksister* cakes in the parlour of Waylands farm and ended with a picnic by a lake bordered with *Chasmanthe*, where weaver birds squabble around their nests and a tortoise munches through *Diascia*. For a few short hours we have seen one of the wonders of the floral world, an embarrassment of riches we are unlikely to find elsewhere. I am happy to have seen it, and happier still that it's safe in the hands of John Duckitt. □

Further information

Waylands Farm Flower Reserve, Darling, South Africa. Tel +27 22 492 2873.

- John Duckitt and his wife Jeanette have a comfortable guest house on their farm. Email jduckitt@megaserve.net for details.
- The Darling Flower show takes place on the third weekend of September. For details see www.darlingwildflowers.co.za

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The blue-flowered annual *Heliophila coronopifolia* is a prolific self-seeder and forms enormous colonies, mingling here with yellow blooms including *Senecio littoreus*.