

H&G IN THE GARDEN

LOCAL GARDEN | PLANTS | GARDEN NEWS | KNOW HOW

THE JEWEL OF AFRICA

With the eastern slopes of Table Mountain as backdrop, Kirstenbosch National Botanic Garden is one of the most breathtaking havens of biodiversity

WHILE WALKING THROUGH Kirstenbosch in the southern suburbs of Cape Town, one becomes acutely aware that past, present and future are intertwined to form a microcosmos of nature-focused activities.

Established in 1913 to promote, conserve and display southern Africa's diverse plant life, this horticultural landmark was the first botanic garden in the world to be devoted to a country's indigenous flora. Staying true to its ▶

Kirstenbosch National Botanic Garden has a visitor-friendly layout that includes 450 tree species, lush lawns and a fusion of flower beds brimming with bulbs, annuals, perennials, shrubs and succulents





initial noble purpose, the garden has systematically evolved into an internationally acclaimed showpiece that attracts over 600 000 visitors a year. Today, the 528-hectare estate includes protected mountainside, which supports natural forest and fynbos, while the 36-hectare cultivated garden houses over 7 000 plant species.

Beyond the garden's aesthetic significance, there is an often unseen component to Kirstenbosch. With the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) as custodian, it is the largest of the countrywide network of nine National Botanical Gardens and forms a self-sustaining hub of scientific research, horticultural development, environmental protection and education.

'Although SANBI and the other National Botanic Gardens receive a grant from Government, Kirstenbosch is the only one that is self-funding and has been so since 2005,' says Alice Notten, interpretation officer at Kirstenbosch. Income is generated in a number of ways, including entry fees, concerts, and seed and plant sales.

Notably, Kirstenbosch is involved in numerous activities to create environmental awareness. Displays on useful plants, water-wise gardening and growing fragrant plants inform visitors. While future generations are given hands-on experience on the importance of preserving our natural heritage through the Kirstenbosch Environmental Education Programme at the Gold Fields Centre.

Through SANBI's Threatened Species Programme, endangered plant species are propagated at Kirstenbosch, whereafter they are reintroduced into their natural habitat. 'Sometimes plants are saved from extinction in the wild,' says Notten. 'As in the case of *Erica verticillata*.'

Likewise, the Seed Room at Kirstenbosch collects and processes seeds from the garden, which are then sold to ▶



TOP LEFT Yellow *Ursinia cakilefolia* flower beneath a paperbark thorn (*Acacia sieberiana*). Beyond lies a blue belt of *Selago canescens*

BOTTOM RIGHT *Euphorbia dregeana* 1. In spring, carpets of orange and yellow vygies (*Lampranthus aureus*), as well as the purple and pink variety (*L. roseus*) dot the Yggy Rockery 2. Birds, such as this Cape Sugarbird (*Promerops cafer*) sitting on a *Protea repens*, are abundant at Kirstenbosch 3. The red Mimetes is a new growth of *Mimetes cucullatus* OPPOSITE PAGE *Strelitzia reginae* 'Mandela's Gold', a rare yellow form of the well-known crane flower, shows off its bright colour against a forest corkwood (*Commiphora woodii*)



South Africa has an astounding selection of plant life and is home to almost half of the world's succulents, over 22 000 indigenous plant species and unique floral biomes

Kirstenbosch is in the heart of the Cape Floristic Region, which is the smallest and richest of the world's six floral kingdoms - nearly 9 600 species of fauna are crammed into 0.04-per-cent of the earth's land surface. Moreover, this floral kingdom is the only one to be contained within a single country and was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2004. Subsequently, Kirstenbosch became the first botanical garden in the world to be included as part of a natural World Heritage Site inscription.



'Botanical gardens fill a very particular niche. By definition they are a collection of plants gathered for their botanical, ecological and geographical interest, as much as their



TOP LEFT The sculptural tree aloe (*Aloe barberae*) has a smooth grey bark and green recurved leaves **1**. Yellow *Chasmanthe floribunda* var. *duckittii* add waves of colour from winter to early spring **2**. *Dissotis canescens* boasts magenta blooms between December and April **3**. A palette of grey and white provides dramatic contrast in winter **4**. Bronze sculpture by world-renowned South African-born sculptor Dylan Lewis **BOTTOM LEFT** The Cycad Amphitheatre showcases a selection of these primitive-looking plants. Also known as living fossils, cycads have been around for 250 million years and have changed little since prehistoric times

horticultural niche. By definition for their botanical, ecological and aesthetic value' MONTY DON

horticulturists and the public. The Cape Section of the Millennium Seed Bank Project International Programme, a conservation project coordinated by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, is also housed in the same building. Its purpose is to provide an insurance policy against the extinction of plants by storing seeds for future use.

Along with the protected mountainside, the cultivated garden's horticultural treasures form its ultimate showpiece. This section features 450 tree species, a wide variety of proteas, ericas and fynbos, as well as plants from other regions in South Africa. 'The Botanical Society Conservatory enables Kirstenbosch to display indigenous plants that cannot be grown outdoors due to Cape Town's wet winters,' says Notten. While the nursery houses many important scientific collections, such as *Clivia*, *Gasteria* and *Lithops*.

Naturally, Cape flora enjoy pride of place. The Peninsula Garden displays some of the 2 500 plant species found exclusively in the Cape Peninsula and on the higher slopes, the Protea Garden is most magnificent in winter and spring when the *Protea* and *Leucospermum* are in bloom. The Fynbos Walk is another section dedicated to the Cape Floral Kingdom's vegetation.

Kirstenbosch's rich history can be seen throughout the garden. Van Riebeeck's Hedge has remnants of a



TOP RIGHT The Fynbos Walk passes through the Erica Garden, where *Leucospermum formosum*, *Helichrysum foetidum* var. *foetidum*, *Erica discolor* and *H. foetidum*, create layers of colour and texture. In the background, a mountain cypress (*Widdringtonia nodiflora*) adds interest **LEFT** *Leucadendron tinctum* or spicy cone-bush flowers in July and is a member of the Proteaceae family. In this genus, the male and female flowers are borne on separate plants. The shiny maroon flower head pictured here is a maturing female flower, while male flower heads are yellow

wild almond (*Brabejum stellatifolium*) hedge that Jan Van Riebeeck planted soon after arriving in the Cape in 1660. Also of historical interest is an avenue of camphor trees from China (*Cinnamomum camphorum*) and Moreton Bay Figs from Australia (*Ficus macrophylla*), which Cecil John Rhodes planted in 1898.

In the Dell – the oldest part of the garden – tree fuchsias (*Halleria lucida*) and African hollies (*Ilex mitis*) cast blankets of shade on tree ferns (*Cyathea dregei*) and *Dicksonia antarctica*, *Plectranthus* and *Streptocarpus*.

The Cycad Amphitheatre – a natural amphitheatre above the Dell – displays a selection of southern African cycads (*Encephalartos spp.*), including *E. woodii*, that are extinct in the wild.

This strong focus on preserving our country's rich floral bounty seems to hold the key to this botanical treasure's rise to international fame. As Dr Tanya Abrahamse, chief executive of SANBI points out: 'Nature is not a luxury, it is key to our mental and physical survival.' Because ultimately, Kirstenbosch is there for everyone to enjoy – preferably barefoot, sitting on the lush lawn, surrounded by nature. One visitor sums up this philosophy perfectly: 'You don't have to be a botanist to appreciate the peace, tranquillity and breathtaking beauty of Kirstenbosch.'

■ *Kirstenbosch National Botanic Garden* ☎ 021 799 8783