



Vast sweeps of planted fynbos with *Metaplasia muricata* (Blombos) in the foreground, have been left to naturalise. The result is an unirrigated garden that brims with fragrance, nature and seasonal surprises



# Wonderfully Wild

Landscape designer Franchesca Watson on how to achieve and maintain a garden filled with local plants that will flourish and delight if you allow it to

**T**here is an idea around that if you merely plant local plants, that nature can be recreated and you can have a garden that you don't have to water or maintain at all in terms of feeding, pruning, mulching or any of those other resource-rich inputs.

This is possible to do but it takes time, deep knowledge and serious input at the beginning.

■ **THE SOIL** Firstly, you will have to really understand the soils that you are dealing with, and quite possibly have to correct what may have happened to them in the past – this is particularly true of old farmlands that have been overfertilised. Have an in-depth soil sample done, and try to reinstate the original chemical and texture conditions to the site.

■ **THE RIGHT PLANTS** Secondly, you will have to work out a palette of local plants that would have grown there naturally – best to consult an area-specific botanist for this as local subspecies and interdependencies are vitally important and the right plants are difficult to source at the average nursery. You will also need to understand how the various layers of plants

work together from trees and shrubs, down to ground covers, annuals and perennials, bulbs, climbers and sedges, and to make sure that you are planting all the various components required to balance the ecosystem.

■ **WEANING** Thirdly, once the garden is planted, the plants will need time to establish before you can start weaning them off water and other care. This is because in nature new plants would grow by seed and would be sheltered by the existing cover of vegetation. Despite this, only the strongest individuals would survive – and you may not want more than 50 percent of the plants you have bought not making it. The weaning process could take anything from three to five years and again you will need expert advice as each ecosystem is different. It can be quite a difficult process and you will in all probability have to let go of most of your preconceptions, but you will have some lovely surprises along the way.

■ **LONG-TERM INTERVENTIONS** Left to its own devices, nature makes some harsh changes in any landscape from time to time and this is what rejuvenates the plants. Think of veld fires, trees falling in the forest,

animals grazing, natural flooding and drought. This will not happen so easily in your garden, so sometimes you will have to make these decisions. Listen to your botanical expert, who will be able to guide you as to the time you need to clear something in order to simulate a fire so as to allow your bulbs to flower again, or to take down that pioneer tree that would have been blown over in nature to allow light to reach the forest floor.

■ **ACCEPTANCE** Once you are working in tandem with nature, you need to accept what happens. The garden will have a life of its own. It's an exercise in letting go, realising that nature changes all the time and has an ebb and flow of positive and negative. Your job is to understand, observe and gently facilitate. You will be rewarded with a garden that is not static in any way, but humming with bird, animal and insect life and that will constantly interest and stimulate you. And once your eyes adjust to the more unconventional conceptions of orderliness, wonderfully beautiful too.

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