

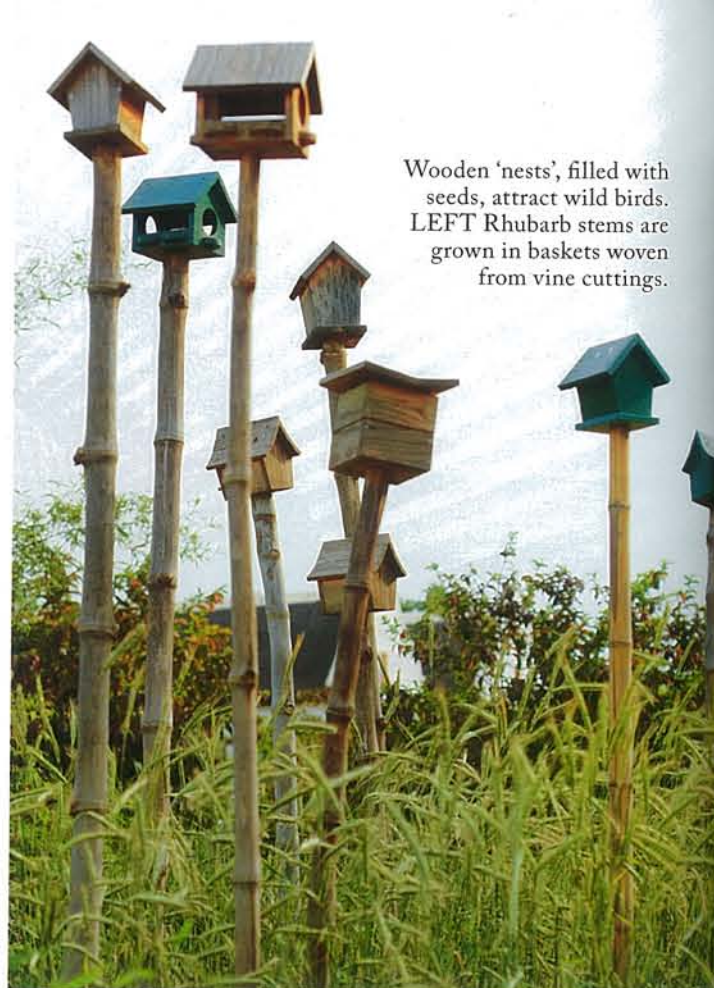
A wooden arbour of pink New Dawn roses frames a central persimmon tree with fragrant organum as a ground cover. OPPOSITE The 'puff adder' shade tunnel houses seasonal displays, from *Clivias* in spring to berries in summer.

food for thought

Planted to stimulate both appetite and imagination, Paarl estate Babylonstoren's garden is a feast for the senses

Text Catriona Ross Photographs Micky Hoyle





Wooden 'nests', filled with seeds, attract wild birds.
LEFT Rhubarb stems are grown in baskets woven from vine cuttings.



Cape honey bees make superb honey from the garden's abundant herbs.
RIGHT A pond of exotic lotus lilies, which are grown specifically for their edible roots, stems, leaves, flowers and seeds.





A sweetly scented New Dawn rose. ABOVE A fragrant labyrinth of thyme and lavender plants spells out 'Babylons' in front of Babel restaurant.

Only a garden of eccentric Cape charm could house such a place as The Mulberry Meditation Room. At Babylonstoren estate between Paarl and Franschoek in the Western Cape, the unhurried visitor might discover this enclosure of sprawling mulberry trees bearing juicy black and white summer fruit and be tempted into a private tasting. Sitting on the bench while shadows shift across a whitewashed wall and leaves turn translucent emerald, your stresses quietly recede.

'I believe it's a garden's job to give joy and peace. A medley of fragrance, colour and sound helps, but nothing beats the beauty of an ancient tree,' says owner Karen Roos, a former magazine editor. In 2007 she and her husband, Koos Bekker, acquired the grape and fruit farm. Dating back to 1690, it was named after its prominent koppie, which reminded Dutch pioneers in the Drakenstein valley of the biblical Tower of Babel. Here Karen envisaged creating not only Babel restaurant, a winery, a boutique hotel and a spa, but also an edible garden open to the public. Cape Town's Dutch East India Company gardens, which supplied fresh produce to its sailing ships in the 17th and 18th centuries, was a source of inspiration.

Since its establishment, Babylonstoren's 3.5ha garden has evolved through trial and error. 'Some of what we tried initially looked out of place,' Karen admits, 'but gradually a few themes emerged: natural, genuine, simple, organic, in tune with nature.' French architect Patrice Taravella of the famous Prieuré d'Orsan monastery garden near Bourges contributed ideas – particularly the medieval concept of a 'world in a garden', a place that supplies food, medicine and entertainment, and offers areas for rest, play and spirituality.

Its formal layout comprises gravel paths, avenues of trees as windbreaks, canals for water, and vegetable crops in rectangular beds. This underlying structure links the old with the new: the farm's historic main axis, running through the 1777 Cape Dutch farmhouse, now extends down the centre of the garden, while two side axes have been pulled through from the bell tower and old cellar. Enclosed by low walls, the large kitchen garden is divided into a grid of units, each with a distinct function, from food for the restaurant to contemplation. 'Even though it's large, the garden is broken down into small "rooms",' says head gardener Liesl van der Walt. 'This introduces elements of surprise. There's a bit of mystery, a bit of fun.'

In this semi-desert environment, with soil consisting of a layer of sand on impenetrable clay, the biggest stumbling blocks were drainage and irrigation. The soil-improvement programme included loads of chicken and cow manure and compost to enrich the soil. (Today, Babel's kitchen waste ends up on compost heaps, where it is decomposed by an earthworm bed.) An efficient watering system was installed: water is pumped from the nearby Berg River to an irrigation dam, and flows with gravity through the garden in canals.

'For trees to flourish long term, good soil preparation is essential,' says Liesl. Indeed, in just four years, Babylonstoren has become a Versailles of vegetable gardens. A team of 16 permanent staff tends the plants, working as organically as possible and improving diversity, while ducks and hens strut around on pest patrol.

'Everything grown in the garden is used in some way, from poppy seeds to rose petals, which appear in salads and rose cordial,' Liesl explains. Elderberry, mint and citrus verbena are picked for fresh tea, while salad, vegetables and herbs are harvested each morning for the restaurant. Extra produce is made into pickles and preserves, which is sold in the shop.

Unusual plants with interesting tales are featured, such as Newton's 1665 apple tree, purple carrots and sausage-shaped *Passiflora mollissima* with their pink tutu-like flowers, and olifantsvoet and baobab in the glasshouse. ▽



A full-time pruner, oom Anton Roux, shapes the apple and pear trees and quince hedges into artful forms. Plum, peach, apricot and nectarine trees are espaliered in crisscross designs, a French method for producing smaller numbers of beautiful fruit. Between rows of stone-fruit trees, a patchwork carpet of indigenous herbs such as vaaltee, buchu, thymes, carnations and winter savoury boosts diversity and provides flowers for bees. Fragrance is everywhere, from the scented labyrinth at the entrance spelling out the farm's name to the indigenous fragrance garden heady with wild jasmine, wild gardenias, confetti bush and rose-scented pelargoniums.

The wooden rose towers, important structural elements in the garden's early days, now supply shade, fragrance and aesthetic beauty too, especially when festooned with creamy Kiftsgate and Crème Caramel blooms, pink-tinged Madame Alfred Carrière and New Dawn and peachy Albertine.

'My favourite spots change with the seasons,' Karen says. In spring she adores the quince blossoms, the nectar-loving birds and the scent of orange blossom. In summer add the sensation of peach pips on the soles of your feet in the stone-fruit section, and you have a recipe for garden bliss.

The human element is surprisingly important, she explains. 'Initially I underestimated the effect visitors would have on completing the garden: now we ask ourselves how visitors will best experience and enjoy it.' Babylonstoren's daily garden tours invite adults and children to pick pineapple sage, eat berries, take cuttings, flop onto the Roman camomile lawn – and, naturally, to stop and smell the roses. **▢ Babylonstoren is open daily from 9am to 5pm, with garden tours at 10am; 021-863-3852, babylonstoren.com/garden**



CLOCKWISE Strings supporting climbing tomatoes are pulled taut by stone weights over the wall; a proud Potchefstroom Koekoek cock and hen provide eggs; shards of blue-and-white china collected on the farm during the garden's establishment inspired this mosaic.



LEISURE GARDEN



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT The tree tomato, or tamarillo, is delicious peeled and eaten fresh for breakfast; organic green and red cabbages grow alongside spring onions; the 'weaver's nest', set in a stand of tall bamboo, is for wild-bird watching; gravity propels water in canals spanning the length of the garden.



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