

SINGAPORE

# Flatter Homes

## Realms of Fun

Craft memorable spaces with details inspired by the metaverse and fantasy worlds





Master gardener Gundula Deutschländer in the Spice House at Babylonstoren in South Africa. She and the garden team are always working out how the "experience of being in this lovely space can also be brought to your own table at your home."



| Inspiration |

# World of Spice

In the Spice House, master gardener Gundula Deutschländer and her team have created a verdant paradise in Cape Town showcasing the many charms of spice-bearing plants

*By Robyn Alexander. Photography by Warren Heath / Bureaux*

It's just after 8am at Babylonstoren, a hotel and wine destination with a new but already world-renowned garden and farm in Cape Town, South Africa. The estate is a short drive from the city centre, and there's bustle and activity everywhere this morning, as there always is on a working farm.

However, inside one of the garden team's recent projects—the Spice House—all is calm and quiet. As we await master gardener Gundula Deutschländer, there is time to take in the details of the greenhouse itself: these include details such as the classic cast-metal

doors, opaque glass panels, a large slab of stone fashioned into a striking table with a central water runnel and edged with wooden benches, and a slatted wooden floor raised above a pool of water populated with fish that regularly swim up into the two glass tanks placed at either end of the wooden deck. It's pleasantly warm and humid, and the air is redolent with the subtle scents of humus-filled soil and the variety of lush tropical plants that fill the space.

Into this beautiful, tranquil zone comes Deutschländer, who—rather like the contents of the greenhouse—glows with a gentle yet



## “[Gardening is] a humbling experience, no matter what you do”

resilient energy. She is the epitome of the softly spoken gardener who exudes subtle strength. “It’s quite remarkable this morning that we don’t have the misters on, but I think it’s because you’re here,” she smiles. “When I came here yesterday, you couldn’t see more than a metre in front of you.” Having worked at Babylonstoren for over 13 years as its master gardener, Deuschländer has played a part in the estate’s innovative gardening efforts, and the Spice House is the latest of these.

She explains that the project originated from the idea of creating a space on the farm that served as a reminder of the Cape of Good Hope’s history as a place through which so many precious spices once passed from East to West. It’s a way of paying tribute to the spices themselves, too; and to those who had “an obsession with everything exotic, from sugar to paper”, as Deuschländer puts it. As the Western Cape has a dry, Mediterranean-style

climate, doing this necessitated building a greenhouse for the spice plants, which are almost invariably subtropical or tropical in origin—and so, require those same conditions to be replicated for them in order to thrive.

What’s more, most of these plants, which range from black pepper to galangal, tamarind and cardamom, are far from easy to come by in South Africa. Deuschländer says some were found via connections at botanical gardens in Durban and other subtropical parts of the country, adding that her fellow Babylonstoren botanist, Ernst van Jaarsveld, was a great help in this regard. International suppliers had to be tapped, and a special journey to Zanzibar to source plants was undertaken, too.

In other words, like every beautiful garden, the Spice House has taken considerable effort—and quite a lot of time—to create. And, as Deuschländer relates, it has taught those who tend it all kinds of unexpected



This page, clockwise from top left: The butterfly pea, a plant extremely hard to find in South Africa, was given to the master gardener by a Chinese visitor; as the butterfly pea flowers dry, they are picked to make this blue infusion, which she brews for guests on special occasions; adding a few drops of lemon juice to the butterfly pea infusion gives it a mauve purple hue

Opposite page: While most of the gardens at Babylonstoren grow only edible and medicinal plants, the planting here is about creating a rainforest atmosphere with the inclusion of a lush variety of ferns, orchids and Spanish moss





**This page:** Deutschländer unearths turmeric rhizomes; the fresh roots are crushed with other rhizomes such as ginger to make a unique infusion. "I'm fascinated with root crops because it's really like mining for jewels," she says. "You only lift them to harvest when the plants are dormant, so everything growing above the soil looks dull. And then you bring out this incredible, intense, gem-like crop from the earth."

**Opposite page:** Fragrant edible leaves and dried spices are added to the crushed turmeric and ginger to create one of Deutschländer's signature infusions. Turmeric is one of her favourites, partly because of its vibrant yellow colour: "It's just like sunshine, but it comes from the ground."

lessons. "The black pepper plants are the ones that really guide us in how the conditions should be," she says. "At first, we lost almost all of the seedlings we planted. So then we put in the air-conditioning. Because they were signalling, 'it's too hot!'"

Likewise, as with any other garden, unexpected weather events played their part. A couple of years back, for example, "we had a terrible downpour for two days", which caused the entire greenhouse to flood. But while the gardeners imagined that all the plants would rot, "instead, the ginger just burst into life," says Deutschländer. "So we realised this monsoon-like event was good for some of the plants."

Deutschländer suggests that dealing with the challenges—and many humbling experiences—that are a seemingly inevitable part of being a gardener is probably helped by "coming from a family connected with plants and gardening". Her mother is a landscaper: "We bounce ideas off each other all the time." And, she adds, "My father taught [my mum] how to plant, as he comes from a family in Germany who are all foresters, so it kind of merges together."

That said, Deutschländer's own leanings as she was growing up were towards art. She

studied painting at Stellenbosch University, but it gradually became clear that a career as a full-time contemporary artist wasn't ideally suited to her. "I was always very shy," says Deutschländer. Yet once she became a gardener, she explains, "when you're working with nature, it's not about yourself any more. You can get so excited about these things. And then you need to share the message—you lose your ego in that way." She spent time working in gardens in Europe, and travelled widely too before returning to the African part of her roots in the Western Cape.

Creating a unique and memorable experience for visitors to the farm is very much part of Babylonstoren's mission. "That's the magnificence of working here," says Deutschländer. "We are able, in our work, to share in such different ways. Not only visually, but also through giving people an experience that they can make their own—like creating a spiced infusion from freshly picked plants for somebody and sharing that."

Most of the gardens at Babylonstoren, by deliberate intent, grow only edible and medicinal plants. The Spice House currently includes black pepper, chillies, vanilla, turmeric, ginger, galangal, tamarind, cacao, cardamom, bananas, papayas, curry



This page: The roots of this epiphytic *Dendrobium* orchid extract all the water the plant needs from the moist air in the Spice House; this papaya tree has started bearing fruit

Opposite page: Some of the dried spices Deuschländer might use to create one of her trademark infusions include cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, green cardamom, black pepper and star anise



leaves and a butterfly pea plant—but also features a sacred fig (*Ficus religiosa*) that has been grown from a cutting taken from the original and legendary tree under which the Buddha sat, as well as a plethora of ferns, some orchids, and bold clumps of Spanish moss (*Tillandsia usneoides*).

Explains the gardener: “We started off being very strict with ourselves: only spices from the Far East. Okay, that tells the story. But we found the space didn’t have enough atmosphere.” So, in the last few years, the team has added other tropical and jungle elements, even though they’re not all edible or medicinal. “Here, we decided rather to go into the character of the setting,” says Deuschländer. And that’s precisely the sort of impression the Spice House creates: being here is like stepping into a delightfully verdant dreamland.

When asked about the overall meaning of being a gardener, Deuschländer stresses that “over and again, it’s a humbling experience, no matter what you do”. She’s one of the most knowledgeable and experienced gardeners in South Africa, and works within a large team, but recognises that much of the time, for many of us with an interest in plants, “gardening is an isolated, almost insular occupation, but you’re continuously aware that you have the greater role beyond”—a role that is about being one of those who connect with and tend the earth.

With her gentle smile breaking through once again, she says: “It’s about giving yourself the time to be okay with being by yourself, so that you can also be okay with being out there.”

