



# Newsletter

## March 2018

“The love of gardening is a seed once sown that never dies.”

### **FUTURE-PROOF YOUR GARDEN**

five steps toward drought resistance for next summer

On our cover this month is the March lily, *Amaryllis belladonna*. March lilies signal the approach of autumn. The leaves emerge after flowering and grow during the rainy season.

*Amaryllis belladonna* is native to the Western Cape. This plant was already known in Europe in 1623. Today it is grown around the world and naturalized in many countries.

March lilies like good drainage and full sun or light shade. They resent disturbance and tend not to flower in the first year after planting.

Even though March lilies herald the end of summer, the drought wears on, leading many Cape gardeners to despair. Who can remain optimistic when faced with brown lawns and dying plants? There is a danger that some will even turn to the dark side and embrace artificial grass.

Don't lose hope! You can have a beautiful garden without irrigation. But the journey has to start today. This month's newsletter shows the way.

**Create a garden that will remain beautiful throughout the driest summer**

# ①

## Develop a Mediterranean mind-set

Gardeners often expect their plants to peak in summer. After all, this is when many of us have some time off and want to be outside, tending the braai or enjoying a beer. The reality is that the Cape has a Mediterranean climate and plants shut down over summer to survive the heat and drought.

Don't fight nature. Plan your peak flowering displays for late winter and spring. Provide structure throughout the year with trees and evergreen shrubs. Many small drought resistant shrubs create wonderful summer interest when clipped into balls. Contrasting these with flowering grasses introduces movement. Think zen when planting your summer garden.

Now is the best time to take stock of your garden. Begin by identifying areas where plants have suffered most. Ask yourself why. One reason may be that there are too many plants for the available moisture.

For example, plants near large trees may struggle due to root competition. Consider removing the affected plants. Replace them with bark mulch, gravel or permeable paving. Add a couple of chairs and you have a shady seating area. Now, the only thing missing is a drink.



# ②

## Match the right plant to the right place

With infinite resources, you can grow lettuce in space. Astronauts have actually done this on the International Space Station. That doesn't mean that you should be planting thirsty flowers in a dry garden. Match plants to your conditions and they will thrive with little or no further inputs.

So, how do you find the right plants?

Start in your own garden. Identify the casualties. You don't want to replace them with more of the same. Instead, go for plants that you like and that have kept their good looks over summer.

Next, take a walk around your neighborhood. Talk to other gardeners. Look at plants growing on the same soil type as your own garden. Identify those that are flourishing on neglect. These may be excellent candidates for your garden.

Study any natural vegetation in your area, especially on the same soil type as your garden. Many indigenous plants not only survive summer drought, but they actually need it.

Take your phone along and snap a photo of anything that catches your eye. You can ask for help with identification at your local nursery or botanical garden. Chances are, they can also supply the plant that you are looking for.

**Put plants in the right place  
and you don't have to worry about watering**

### ③

## Start an underground movement

When it comes to drought resistance, your soil is key. Open soils and good drainage allow plants to develop large root systems. Plants depend on extensive roots to find water during dry periods.

Good drainage relies on an open soil structure with no obstructions to the flow of water. Cast your mind back three years, to the last heavy rains. If parts of your garden were soggy then, you may have a drainage issue which will limit your plant selection. Breaking up compacted soil improves drainage. Other options include raised beds and installing land drains.

***Gaura (Oenothera lindheimeri)* seen growing in sandy soil with no irrigation. Free-flowering gaura will also tolerate heavy soils.**



Soil type also impacts drainage and root development. You can find discussions of different soil types in any gardening book. But you don't need to read any of that if you aren't interested. The only thing that you need to remember is that you can improve any soil by adding organic matter.

Organic matter comes in many forms. The most common are compost and aged manure. Don't use fresh manure. It is not suitable for garden use and likely to strain relations with your neighbors.

Organic matter can be dug into the soil or placed on the surface as a mulch. When preparing a new planting area, do both. Over time, organic matter improves the soil structure. The soil will hold more water and be easier for roots to penetrate. Your plants will respond with better growth and survival.

***Abelia (Linnaea x grandiflora)* found thriving on clay in a neglected garden. This shrub was first cultivated in 1886 in Italy.**



## ④

### Master drought with mulch

Someone once said that if you teach someone to plant, he will garden for a day. But, if you teach him to mulch, he will garden for a lifetime. Or words to that effect.

A mulch is a layer of material that covers the soil. Any mulch will reduce evaporation and conserve soil moisture. Mulch helps rain to penetrate the soil by preventing compaction and limiting runoff. As though that isn't enough, mulch suppresses weeds that steal water from your plants.

Mulching is critical to a successful dry garden. Without it, your soil dries out. Soon after, your planting deteriorates into a wasteland of dust and wilted weeds.

There are two main types of mulch. We discussed inorganic mulches in detail in our November newsletter. Organic mulches consist of plant material and include compost and bark chips. Organic mulches are available online and from nurseries. The advantage of organic mulches is that they improve the soil structure as they break down.

Remember, mulching is not an exercise in minimalism. More is more here. Use a generous layer and cover all exposed soil. If your soil already has a dry crust, break this up first.

## ⑤

### Set your plants up for success

For many gardeners, planting is the best part. We love going to the nursery, bringing home our latest find and putting it in the ground. The current drought may have put the brakes on us, but come the rains, we will be back out there.

Autumn has always been peak planting time for savvy Cape gardeners. The soil is moist but not cold and the weather mild but not baking. Plants have time to establish over the course of winter. Come summer, they have strong root systems to survive drought.

Rushing to the nursery after the first rains may not be the ideal strategy. If you think your garden is ready for new plants, you can make sure by digging some test holes. Dry soil at root depth means you need to wait a little longer.

Take extra care with planting. For tips, read our visual guide in the August newsletter. Resist the temptation to feed or pamper the plants once they are in place. Leave them to make strong roots. The top growth will follow.

A new planting can look very bare, which is why gardeners often crowd young plants. This is fatal in a dry garden. Rather fill in the gaps with annuals or bulbs for a spring display. You can lift and move the bulbs when the perennial plants become larger.



## Silverbush

*Convolvulus cneorum*



### Size

↑ 50 cm  
↔ 70 cm

### Soil

Prefers sandy soils  
Requires good drainage

### Exposure

Full sun

### Season

Flowers spring to summer

### Drought resistance

4 months per year

Silverbush grows naturally along the coasts of Spain, Italy, Croatia and Albania. The leaves shine silver due to a dense coat of fine hairs.

### DROUGHT RESISTANT SHRUBS FOR TOPIARY

#### Wild rosemary

*Eriosephalus africanus*

#### Lavender

*Lavendula species*

#### Common myrtle

*Myrtus communis*

#### Rosemary

*Rosmarinus officinalis*

#### Cotton lavender

*Santolina chamaecyparissus*

#### Dune crow-berry

*Searsia (Rhus) crenata*

#### Coastal rosemary

*Westringia fruticosa*



Contact us  
[www.fairholmeplants.co.za](http://www.fairholmeplants.co.za)  
[fairholme@breede.co.za](mailto:fairholme@breede.co.za)  
cell 082 550 8703  
PO Box 302  
Grabouw 7160