In my Aloe and succulent garden

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A slight departure from the normal UK greenhouse in this issue. The BCSS does have a sizeable overseas membership and many of them are fortunate enough to be able to grow the majority of their cacti and succulents outdoors. We look at how one such garden was created in Zimbabwe.

My love for aloes and succulents goes back to my ancestors who settled in the Eastern Cape in South Africa in 1820. I have lived in southern Africa my whole life, and am constantly inspired and delighted by the arresting beauty that our harsh environment can create. Africa's and unforgiving climate the diminishing supplies of water in Zimbabwe have woken us up to reducing our exotic collections and focusing on indigenous and sturdy survivors. Winters here in Harare are



Fig. 1 The author relaxing in her garden



Fig. 2 Aerial view of part of the garden



Fig. 3 The tree-house

cool and the dehydrated earth begs for companions that can survive these conditions. We have a humid, subtropical mild summer climate with dry winters. The summer average temperatures are 28°C in the day to 13°C at night, with winter average temperatures ranging between 21°C and 6°C. The average annual precipitation is 805mm, which comes in the form of summer rainfall with thunderstorms, moderate rainfall and light rain. Harare has 2,871 hours of sunshine per year!

After attending the Aloe, Cactus & Succulent Society of Zimbabwe's Xerophytica Congress in 2014, I was inspired to metamorphose my cherished collection of aloes and water-wise plants from their single, prison-like pots and plastic sleeves, all lined up and labelled in regimented rows, into a 'water-wise garden'. I was terrified to release many of my treasured specimens into the open soil, fearing their new free-range environment would not provide the necessary safety and protection for them. With a brave heart, I set about planning their liberation.

A 200m square two-terraced section of my garden provided the ultimate location for this project. The soil was hard and dry, with a history of many plant sacrifices. From the vantage of our tree-house (Figs. 3 & 4), set up in a majestic Msasa tree (*Brachystegia spiciformis*) I set about planning meandering brick paths, small mounds and rocky outcrops.



Fig. 4 View of the new garden from the tree-house



Fig. 5 Bricks used to improve drainage



Fig. 6 Rock positioning



Fig. 7 Pause point with old railway sleeper as a bench

The most important thing to commence with was the conversion of the hard and unforgiving soil into essentially richer and well-drained soil. For added drainage, mounds were built up out of old half-bricks and rocks (Fig. 5). The soil was complemented with a combination of 50% coarse river sand, washed to remove the finer more cement-like particles, and home-made compost using a recipe of carefully turned, well decomposed piles of cattle manure, wet grass/straw and green leafy material, a dash of lime and bone-meal. Igneous rocks from the 2.5-billion-year-old



Fig. 8a Echeverias, mesembs and Aloe chabaudii



Fig. 8b Aloe parvula with Echeveria and mesembs



aloes, from all parts of Africa and the Saudi Arabian peninsula, but to be a sanctuary to wander around, sit and drink a cup of tea. or sip on a glass of dry white wine at the end of the day, while clearing the mind and dusting off the daily challenges that Africa consistently delivers. There are 'pause' areas, where you will feel the need to stop and perch on an old Rhodesian teak railway sleeper bench and just think (Fig. 7), or sit at a mosaic table to appreciate the plants and the gentle sounds of living outside the city limits. An incredible resulting bird, butterfly and insect life abounds and visits the bird-feeders, fashioned out of old animal snare wires, and various bird baths carved out of softer stone or welded-up from old plough-discs.

Fig. 9 Taller aloes (*A. nyeriensis* and *A. speciosa*) underplanted with lower-growing succulents

Great Dyke, rich in magnesium and iron, supplemented the structure and drainage aspects of the layout. Rocks were man-handled into position by me and two fantastic Shona men, Fanuel and Vengai, using a combination of thoughtful planning, wheelbarrows and brute strength (Fig. 6). Several large intruding branches of the Msasa trees were dramatically cut back to provide great nourishing beams of sunlight and to reduce the fatal Msasa drip line that aloes are not fond of.

The design of the garden is focused not only to display a variety of cacti, succulents and other plants, such as euphorbias, sansevierias, cycads, agaves and my personal favourites,





There are a variety of sections to the garden. Some zones are dictated by the need for water, since not all of the plants are robust, as they shun the rainy cascade from a hosepipe. As a rule of thumb, the genuinely resilient plants, such as *Aloe globuligemma*, *A. aculeata*, *A. cameronii*, *A. erinacea*, *Sansevieria pearsonii*, *Euphorbia cooperi* and groupings of *Aloe chabaudii* and *A. cryptopoda* are located just out of the furthest reach of the hosepipe; while the coastal aloes (*A. thraskii*, *A. cooperi*, *A. rupestris* and *A. africana*), and those from Madagascar, Nyanga (*A. inyangensis* and *A. collina*) and Chimanimani





Fig. 12 A. excelsa underplanted with Euphorbia

(*A. munchi* and *A. ballii*), plants that all relish a good showering, are sited right next to the taps.

Other zones are loosely based on geographical regions or natural habitats. A rocky outcrop topped with Aloe cameronii, A. cameronii var. bondana and grasses imitates the huge Domboshava rock formation to the north of Harare, while a hot arid spot shyly echoing the Saudi Arabian peninsula contains Aloe vacillans, A. officinalis, A. sabaea, A. pendens and A. vera. A cooler zone boasts a variety of grass aloes (A. invangensis, A. cooperi, A. ballii and A. munchii, as well as A. chabaudii from the Chimanimani Mountains), which are accompanied by dense clumps of Bulbine and other small succulent ground covers. There are gatherings of plants from Zimbabwe and other places such as South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and even right up to the end of the alphabet - Zanzibar.

Some traditional gardening elements have eased their way in to elevate the over 100 pure species of *Aloe* from a mere collection to a garden. In terms of colour, some areas are dedicated to a conglomeration of echeverias, glaucous mesembs and grey-leaved aloes in silvers and greys (Figs. 8a & 8b), while others shout out with ground covers of bright red succulents to resonate bold, red winter racemes. Luscious spotted green-leafed *Aloe andongensis* alongside yellow-flowering *Aloe maculata* and the yellow-blooming *Aloe vanbalenii* create a palette of limes, ochres and yellows. Plants are endeavoured to be



Fig. 13 Echinocactus grusonii with Agave filifera



Fig. 14 Architectural Sansevieria pearsonii

arranged in the school-like 'height order' to prevent those precious small gems being dwarfed by an enormous flourishing giant (Fig. 9). The gardening theory of planting of specimens in odd numbers is tackled to enhance the overall impression (eq $3 \times A \log$ speciosa together, 5 × Aloe excelsa, 5 × Aloe nyeriensis, 7 × Aloe cryptopoda var. wickensii). In attempts to resonate and applaud nature and the natural habitat, many of the aloes are under-planted with smaller plant life which occurs naturally alongside them, such as Euphorbia (Fig. 12), Crassula, stapeliads and bulbous terrestrial orchids, and many more, in an insignificant effort to imitate their natural environment. Many of the cacti and succulents, Echinocactus grusonii (Fig. 13), Echeveria runvonii. Echeveria 'Curly Locks'. Sansevieria deserti and S. ballyi, are selected





Fig. 15 Aloe vanbalenii (above) with A. aculeata (below)

Fig. 16 *Aloe peglerae* plants complement the *Echeveria* with a backdrop of taller-growing aloes

for their architectural role in adding structure and shape, like the indigenous candelabrashaped *Euphorbia ingens* which shouts boldly, claiming its space alongside a ferocious *Encephalartos ferox* and several skyward-reaching sansevierias that break the organic lines with soldier-like erect leaves en masse (Fig. 14). Other plants were sought after for their variegated leaf colour or vibrant flowers (*Euphorbia lactea*, *E. milii*, *Echeveria glauca*, *Sansevieria trifasciata*, mesembs and crassulas) and create a welcome interruption

Now any honest gardener would have to admit that keeping all your plants alive is not always 100% successful. Gardening is a little like going to war – there are bound to be some casualties along the way! I mourn the plants I have lost and attempt desperately to learn from their deaths. There is a multitude

in the flat dense backgrounds.

of predators, insects, fungi and conditions that prey on my plants. In essence, I believe that healthy plants are least likely to get ill, hence drainage, correct positioning, watering and occasional feeding with well-rotted and composted manure are vital. I spray monthly with a mix of alternating green insecticides (never spraying flowering plants) and fungicides, and occasionally a dash of mineral oil along with suitable wetting and extending agents. Any scale or fungus is treated immediately and Aloe canker is meticulously cut out and burnt. Occasionally plants get lifted out the ground, to be taken to 'intensive care' where they are nursed back to health, without the risk of infecting their neighbours. I feast my eyes over books, and get lost in the never-ending volumes of information that are available, while sitting at my table,



Fig. 17 Mixed planting with crassulas, sansevierias and aloes

surrounded by a vast network of plants that mean the world to me. I believe strongly that, "the more you know, the better it gets".

Critical to the growth of the garden are propagation and the juggling of growing plants. I never miss an opportunity to sow seeds, collected from natural habitats, ordered from the Aloe, Cactus & Succulent Society of Zimbabwe's seed-bank or seed companies, and from fellow enthusiasts. My seeds are grown right under my nose, just outside the kitchen and they are cared for with the greatest possible amount of non-intervention and lack of over-attention! There is nothing guite as rewarding as witnessing a plant you have grown from seed flower for the first time. Almost every plant has a special memory of a place, person or time. Over time, plants often outgrow their space and as one large Aloe or clump of species threatens to take over an area they are uprooted, divided and planted in new areas, or are shared among fellow collectors. The improvement of the garden is never ending, not only by expanding and enlarging, but by more planning, and additional phases that focus on careful selection of ground covers and accompanying water-wise plants. While pure species are certainly addictive favourites, I would have to admit that there are many hybrids permitted residency as aliens in my Aloe garden (Fig. 19). Their robust nature, prolific suckering, and enhanced features, along with superior inflorescences and multiple flowering times, make for a worthy position in the ground.

Now, two years later and seemingly aeons from the historical, dull collection of rows of labelled aloes, is the current garden; a sanctuary and labyrinth, paying homage to dreaming gardeners and eras of aloes in their natural habitats. There is a wonderful soulfulness to this garden, filled with adoration, admiration, friendships and memories.

All photos by the author. Email: stutchbury@zol.co.zw



Fig. 18 Containers are also used for added effect



Fig. 19 Hybrid Aloe 'Hedgehog'