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WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS STEPHANIE HASTIE

# South African adventure

Horticulture educator Stephanie Hastie reflects on a once-in-a-lifetime South African expedition that revealed some interesting learnings closer to home.

South Africa is famous for its magnificent plant diversity. It is home to more than 20,400 plant species, the majority of which naturally occur only within South Africa. Earlier this year, I had the opportunity to go on an exchange to South Africa for three weeks, thanks to the International Plant Propagators' Society. It was a fantastic, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

There are three distinct biodiversity hotspots in South Africa. These are known as the Succulent Karoo (which has the highest diversity of succulents in the world), the Cape Floristic Region (containing most of South Africa's endemic plant species), and the Maputaland–Pondoland–Albany (MPA) Hotspot (which is home to 8100 plant species, 1900 of which are endemic). These areas are incredibly rich in biodiversity and, sadly, under threat.

My first week was spent in Johannesburg, South Africa's biggest city and the capital of the Gauteng province. It is located about an hour away from South Africa's administrative capital, Pretoria. Both Johannesburg and Pretoria have a subtropical highland climate, which means they tend to have dry winters and warm, wet summers.

At the University of Pretoria, I attended a botanic tour and saw one of the rarest plants in the world: *Encephalartos woodii*. The ancestors of this very special species of cycad evolved about 300 million years ago and historically dominated the landscape but it is now extinct in the wild. Due to its rarity, it is worth more than the rest of the university's

cycad collection combined, and this is why you'll find it flanked by a rather unfriendly security fence.

Plant poaching is a huge issue in South Africa, with cycad succulents being particularly popular choices for poachers. At the Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden nursery in Cape Town, they give you a heartbreaking insight into the scale of the issue, housing thousands of rare and endangered plants that have been poached and then intercepted by law enforcement.

From Johannesburg, I then travelled to the east coast (the iSimonsig MPA biodiversity hotspot). I visited Durban and Port Edward, which are coastal cities with a humid subtropical climate, and they both have hot summers and no dry season.

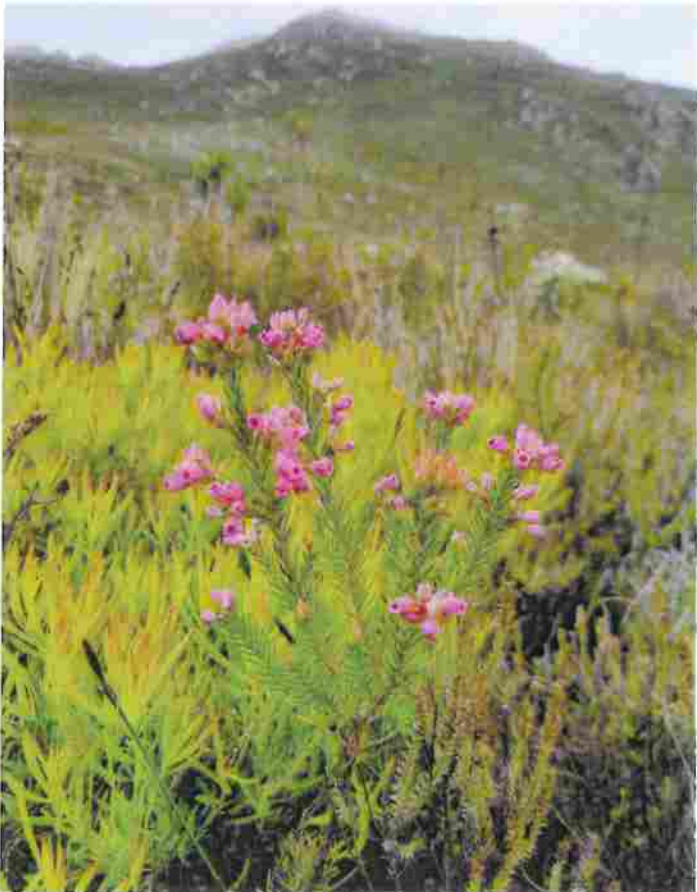
In Durban I visited Stephward nursery, a specialist collector with some very unusual exotic plants. They told me they stop collecting once they reached 10,000 species! Their collection includes the blue peacock fern, *Selaginella willdenowii*, which is native to Thailand and Malaysia. The common name stems from its iridescent blue-green color. However, it is not a true fern, but a fern-like plant known as a clubmoss.

From Durban I travelled to Cape Town, where I was hosted by Shadowlands nursery. Visiting Cape Town was particularly exciting because, like Adelaide, it has a Mediterranean climate characterized by dry summers and cool, wet winters. Many plants that grow well in Adelaide and the wider Cape Floristic Region, also grow well in South A

spring // travel



SOUTH AFRICA IS HOME TO MORE THAN 20,400 PLANT SPECIES, THE MAJORITY OF WHICH NATURALLY OCCUR ONLY WITHIN THE COUNTRY





Protea in bloom. Above right: A riot of hot pink is the Erica (Leonore). Opposite page, top: The bright pink flowers of the amaryllis belladonna are a striking sight, while Erica grow in the wild (bottom, left and right). Opening page: The Erica (Blenna) displays its sunset hues.

oting that some of these plants grow too well in Australia  
 re significant weeds: *Oxalis pes-caprae* (soursob) and  
 ia var. *bulbillifera* (Bulbil watsonia) are the first ones that  
 but they are not the only ones. Meanwhile, many of our  
 natives have turned into horrid horticultural escapees  
 nightmares in South Africa.  
 there are many horticulturally valuable South African  
 e in our climate without being weedy. These include  
 a (Sugarbushes), *Leucadendron* (Conebushes), and  
 (Pincushions). They also include some lovely bulbs, such  
 adonna and many species of Nerine.  
 oting that the term protea is often applied to all plants  
 aceae family. This causes confusion because while  
 ; the largest of plant species within this plant family –  
 oanksia and telopea (waratah) – all plants within the  
 e entirely South African.  
 solute pleasure to see South African plants growing in  
 ions. Not only does it contextualise a plant, but it also  
 preciation of the wider ecosystem and the native wildlife  
 ly species of birds in the Cape Floristic Region.  
 ch translates literally as “fine bush”, is a form of vegetation  
 Africa and the Cape Floristic Region. It is characterised

by the presence of members of the *Proteaceae* family (such as proteas),  
*Ericaceae* family (such as Ericas) and *Restionaceae* family (such as  
 Restios). I visited the area in autumn, which isn't the peak season for  
 viewing Fynbos, but I still got to see some lovely plants in bloom.

As well as seeing some species of Erica blooming in their natural  
 habitat, I also got to see some stunning cultivated Erica in bloom  
 at Arnelia nursery. Located in Western Cape, Arnelia is a fantastic  
 wholesale nursery which specialises in South African natives and some  
 Australian natives.

Historically, Australia has been an excellent propagator of South  
 African species – so much so that South African nurseries have come  
 to Australian propagators for advice on how to grow their own native  
 plants. However, it was lovely to see that plant knowledge being  
 expanded upon within South Africa itself

If you're interested in climate compatible gardening and South  
 African plants that are suitable to plant in your garden, it's well  
 worth visiting Wittunga Botanic Garden in Blackwood, checking out  
 Protea World nursery, and getting involved with the South Australian  
 Mediterranean Garden Society

If you're studying horticulture or you're involved in plant production,  
 I encourage you to become a member of the International Plant  
 Propagators' Society. 🌿