

Daily Mail

# Weekend

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**MY**

# WAGGY-TAILED WONDERS

Countryfile host Adam Henson's heartwarming account of the unique bond between man and dog





## FLOWERS FORMED BY FIRE

**FYNBOS** This is a type of vegetation found in South Africa's Western Cape. Gladioli, proteas (pictured above), pelargoniums, ericas, agapanthus, nerines and restios are among the better-known fynbos plants grown in Britain, but this is the tip of a huge floral iceberg – Table Mountain alone has 1,500 endemic species.

Trees are scarce and the vegetation at first might seem uniformly green and tough, but very soon the richness and diversity becomes apparent. The climate is harsh – relentless summer heat and drought followed by fierce winter storms. Fire is both a constant hazard and, for some plants, a necessity.

Most fynbos areas burn every 12-15 years and the plants have evolved to make the most of this. Dominant shrubs such as proteas and leucadendrons are burnt right back but their seeds survive and are often triggered into growth by the heat. Lower shrubs such as osteospermum will sprout from below ground the first year after a fire, giving them a chance to grow and establish before the more vigorous plants can dominate, and bulbs such as watsonias will make a spectacular flowering following a seemingly devastating fire.

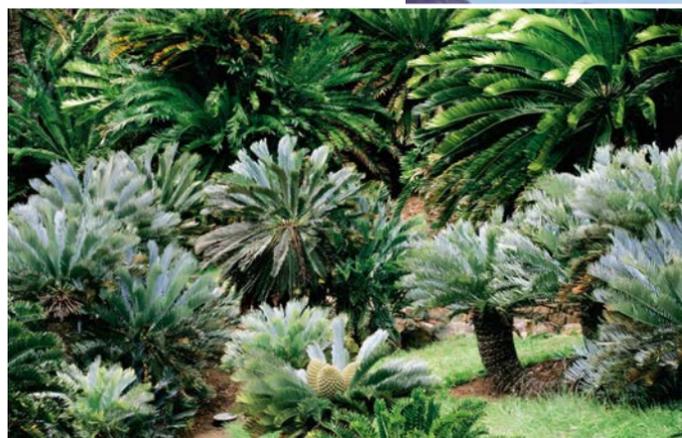
**PELARGONIUMS** There are more than 125 species of pelargonium around the Cape. But if you're growing them in Britain it's time to think about keeping them healthy over the winter.

Those growing in a border should be lifted and potted up over the next few weeks. Store in a light, cool but frost-free place.

Cut back any long, straggly growth plus any shoots that are weak or damaged, but leave at least half the plant. Water very sparingly in winter, letting the compost completely dry out in between, and do not feed.



# WHY I'M CAPTI



Over the past decade I have visited Cape Town in South Africa on three occasions and I hope to do so many more times yet. No matter how often I go I will always head straight to one of my favourite gardens in the world – Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden. The best time to go is between November and February, covering the southern spring and summer.

Everything about Kirstenbosch is on a grand scale. For a start it is in a staggeringly beautiful setting. Table Mountain, which rises directly behind the garden, looks out over the Atlantic. Kirstenbosch is huge, with the gardens extending to just under 100 acres and the estate in which it is set occupying over 1,300 acres of glorious mountainside. The paths are wide, the lawns sweeping, the borders vast and the scale and ambition of the planting breathtaking.

Yet it is one of the very few botanical gardens worldwide that has only indigenous planting, displaying the thousands of plants native to the Cape – some of which, like pelargoniums, agapanthus, gladioli and streptocarpus are very familiar to British gardeners, whereas others are a superb display of the huge variety and range of the local flora.

Unlike most botanical gardens that have a zoo-like quality to them, exhibiting plants from all over the world, every single bush, flower and grass at Kirstenbosch is at home and looks at ease in this setting. This is really the key to the garden because that sense of everything being in the right place – where it most wants to be – pervades the whole landscape. It is



**KIRSTENBOSCH** Monty and Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden with Table Mountain in the background. Inset top: ancient cycads, known as 'living fossils'



**BABYLONSTOREN** Chefs with the morning's haul from the spectacular eight-acre kitchen garden that supplies the restaurants at this former Dutch-colonial farm

grand, it is spectacular, it is hugely ambitious and yet above all it is a place at ease with itself.

As a garden it is full of treasures,

but it is also a wonderful place simply to sit, walk or picnic. In a country still filled with the turmoil of establishing its identity, Kirsten-

bosch is not just a beautiful garden but also a safe haven for women and children.

If you go there, I would suggest leaving enough time to walk round as much of the garden as you can – and much of it is designed in great sweeps rather than in enclosures or garden rooms. But there is one unique area called The Dell that is a must. It contains a collection of cycads, which are among the oldest living plant species in existence. These are planted alongside tree ferns, clivias, podocarpus and oaks in a natural

amphitheatre beside a stream, where beautifully cobbled stepping stones ford the water. There's also a bath, made 200 years ago, which fills with the ice water from natural streams coming down the mountain.

I have visited Kirstenbosch at vari-

## TOTALLY TROPICAL

Cycads are a group of tropical and sub-tropical plants dating back 200m years. One species, the

# VATED BY THE CAPE

Many of our best-loved plants are South African, and they're displayed in all their exotic glory at these three inspirational gardens, says Monty Don



**STELLENBERG** A pristine geometric garden (top) adjoins a house dating back to the early 18th century

ous times of day but recommend going as early as possible when it is cool, the light has a wonderful clarity and freshness and the visitors are few.

The next garden on your itinerary could be Babylonstoren. It is 40 minutes from Cape Town and can be enjoyed around the clock because it is part of one of South Africa's most stylish hotels. Babylonstoren could hardly be more different from Kirstenbosch.

This was a long-established Cape Dutch farm bought in 2007

by South African media magnate Koos Bekker. He revitalised the farm by turning the existing buildings into a hotel and creating a large vegetable garden to supply two of its three restaurants. Money seems to have been no object and emphasis has been put on quality, style and sustainability. The result is a very

modern place with amazing food, and the kind of simplicity that is the hallmark of real luxury.

The eight-acre garden is heroic in the scale of the width of its paths, the network of rills and the elaborate structures and wooden frameworks for ornately pruned fruit.

**'Stellenberg has a leaping joy I've rarely seen bettered'**

I first visited five years ago when the garden was barely two years old and still very much under construction, but even then it was overwhelmingly impressive in ambition and achievement.

Going back this January the transformation was dramatic. It has become a mature, fully realised garden that takes the concept of a kitchen garden to the highest reaches of design.

In principle this is an organic vegetable plot to supply the hotel kitchens, but in practice it is so much more. Babylonstoren is one of the

world's most superb gardens, with a staggeringly rich variety of edible plants creating a small plant town of interlocking areas and rooms. Every form of training and pruning in the shape of cordons, espaliers, fans, step-overs, tunnels, arches and pergolas is practised with supreme skill under the expert eye of the head gardener Liesl van der Walt. Excellence is measured not just by eye but daily in the restaurants.

Babylonstoren is a garden designed for walking calmly, taking in the vistas and drama of the spaces created rather than poring over individual botanic specimens. If you are in the Cape Town area then it is an

absolute must to visit and if you can stay, then you are in for a treat.

Kirstenbosch is a world-famous botanic garden dedicated to South African flora, Babylonstoren is a modern celebration of the best of edible growing and the third garden in this trio of Cape Town horticultural excellence is Stellenberg, which draws upon European gardening traditions in a very African context.

The house, built between 1742 and 1768, is one of the oldest surviving homes in South Africa. On my first visit, ten years ago, it felt like a year's rain was falling at one go it was so wet, but this time I went on a gloriously sunny day. It is a measure of

the garden's appeal that even in the pouring rain it's an absolute delight.

The owners, Sandy and Andrew Ovenstone, first came to Stellenberg in the 1970s but the garden only began its transformation from lawn and mature trees to the current series of immaculately tended rooms and garden spaces 30 years ago. There is a herb garden, white garden and all the recognisable language of sophisticated British gardening – but with both an African and a very personal touch.

Every prospect pleases and everywhere you turn you find one area better than the last. But perhaps the most spectacularly beautiful part is the walled garden with crisp box beds restrainedly filled with elegant perovskia and lavender on one side and riotous with perennial flamboyance on the other. The whole thing combines formality, control and a kind of leaping joy that I have rarely seen equalled, let alone bettered.

Stellenberg has many treasures and is a grown-up, major garden but Sandy Ovenstone, for all her modesty, has given it the one characteristic that makes good gardens great, which is charm. Charm is an elusive quality but it always elevates the familiar to something personal and memorable.

*Kirstenbosch is open daily from 8am-7pm, for prices visit [sanbi.org/gardens/kirstenbosch](http://sanbi.org/gardens/kirstenbosch). Babylonstoren is open daily, with entry free for RHS members, but garden tours must be booked, see [babylonstoren.com](http://babylonstoren.com). Stellenberg can be visited by appointment between September and April, see [stellenberggardens.co.za](http://stellenberggardens.co.za). ■*

## BEST FOR AUTUMN COLOUR

Kniphofias, also known as red hot poker, are among my favourite flowers for late summer and autumn. Although here we use these South African natives as a late-season blaze of colour in our borders, they can also be subtle, like 'Tawny King', whose apricot flowers have an exceptionally long flowering period; 'Wrexham Buttercup', which starts green and ages to a lime yellow; or 'Little Maid' which has small cream flowers.

While many kniphofias start

flowering in high summer, a few wait right to the end of the season, such as *Kniphofia linearifolia*, whose orange flowering stems appear for a few dramatic weeks in October. *K. rooperi* (right) blooms well into October, though it only starts doing so in September. It has less upright, more cone-shaped flowers and is rather hardier than *K. linearifolia*.

Kniphofias will grow on most soils, including heavy clay. They do best in full sun but will cope

with some shade. Many are evergreen but the foliage of deciduous varieties should be left on the plant over winter. Most kniphofias like being lifted and divided every three years or so.

They shouldn't be planted too deep, so always keep the surface of the compost in the pot flush with the surface of the soil in your border.



Sago Palm, can thrive in milder areas of the UK with lots of sun and water in summer and frost protection in winter