

historic

INSPIRED BY THE POTAGER PLAN AT A FRENCH PRIORY, STELLENBERG'S KITCHEN GARDEN IN THE CAPE HAS AN ARRESTING GEOMETRIC DESIGN RICH IN MEDIEVAL SYMBOLISM

TEXT KARIEN SLABBERT PHOTOGRAPHS ALAIN PROUST



revival



A 19th-century wrought-iron gate leads to the monastic-inspired kitchen garden

hidden in a framed corner of the Stellenberg Estate, a vignette of veritable colour and texture greets visitors entering this enclosed haven. Here, in the dappled shade of a Liquidambar tree, an intoxicating convocation of floral fragrances and pungent herbs arouse hints of a simplistic bygone era. It is a contemplative spot and all is quiet – except for the humming of bumblebees and occasional creak of the 19th-century French wrought-iron gate.

With its roots firmly embedded in the past, this heavenly garden is filled with an array of earthly delights, carefully chosen by proprietor Sandy Ovenstone to invoke a sense of old-world cachet. Nine years ago when Ovenstone decided to develop a kitchen garden on the sprawling grounds of this historic estate, she looked for something with a distinctly Gallic personality where a profusion of heirloom edibles could prosper.

And where better to find this, than at a medieval monastery where the garden was an attempt to create harmony between God, humanity and nature? These plots of cultivated land allowed monks to live a self-sustaining lifestyle, relying on the rich pickings from nature's bounty to nourish them.

After a visit to a priory in France, Ovenstone called in Cape Town landscape designer Franchesca Watson to design a functional garden

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skilfully interwoven with rich symbolism almost lost in our secular age. 'When Sandy returned from Prieuré d'Orsan, which was founded in 1107, she was very inspired by these extensively restored gardens and wanted to establish a small organic kitchen garden along the same medieval lines of the priory,' explains Watson.

The result is a contemporary interpretation of a garden characteristic of pre-Renaissance monasteries, brimming with a bountiful communion of vegetables, flowers, fruits and herbs. The philosophy expressed by designer Jacques Wirtz, 'to unite the beauty of the past with the visionary force of the future', reverberates within the confines of this enclosed nook of the estate.

Although the rich spread of edibles takes centre stage and functionality is key, the garden is perfectly manicured and decorative in its own right. In response to its medieval roots, lavish vegetation is set within a symmetrical design. Emphasising geometry, the paths, beds and ornamental structures all play a valuable, symbolic and aesthetic role in the design. The layout is well considered and the area is divided into four square beds, each brimming with individual groups of plants, most ripe for the picking.

At the core of the garden is a stone-plinth water feature, which adds gravitas to the design. Directly inspired by the drinking fountain and trough at the historic French priory, sourcing material for this fontaine de vie took some ingenuity. 'We had to find used granite kerbstones. The central column then had to be made by Clift and Sons gravestone manufacturers in Paarl out of similar granite,' says Watson. 'Sandy also found old fittings for the spouts.' ▶

A LUSH ORCHARD BRIMMING WITH FLESHY EDIBLES

▀ **Structural Planting** Albeit on a smaller scale, the kitchen garden is a well-researched example of how fresh produce might have been grown in medieval France. In the fruit section, apple and plum trees trained as freestanding espaliers on vertical supports relive an old tradition. Espalier training of trees was popular in the Middle Ages and involves pruning and grafting trees to create formal two-dimensional or single-plane branch patterns.

▀ **Fruitful Pickings** Limes, plums, pomegranates, rhubarbs, strawberries and apples have been successfully cultivated since the garden's inception nine years ago.



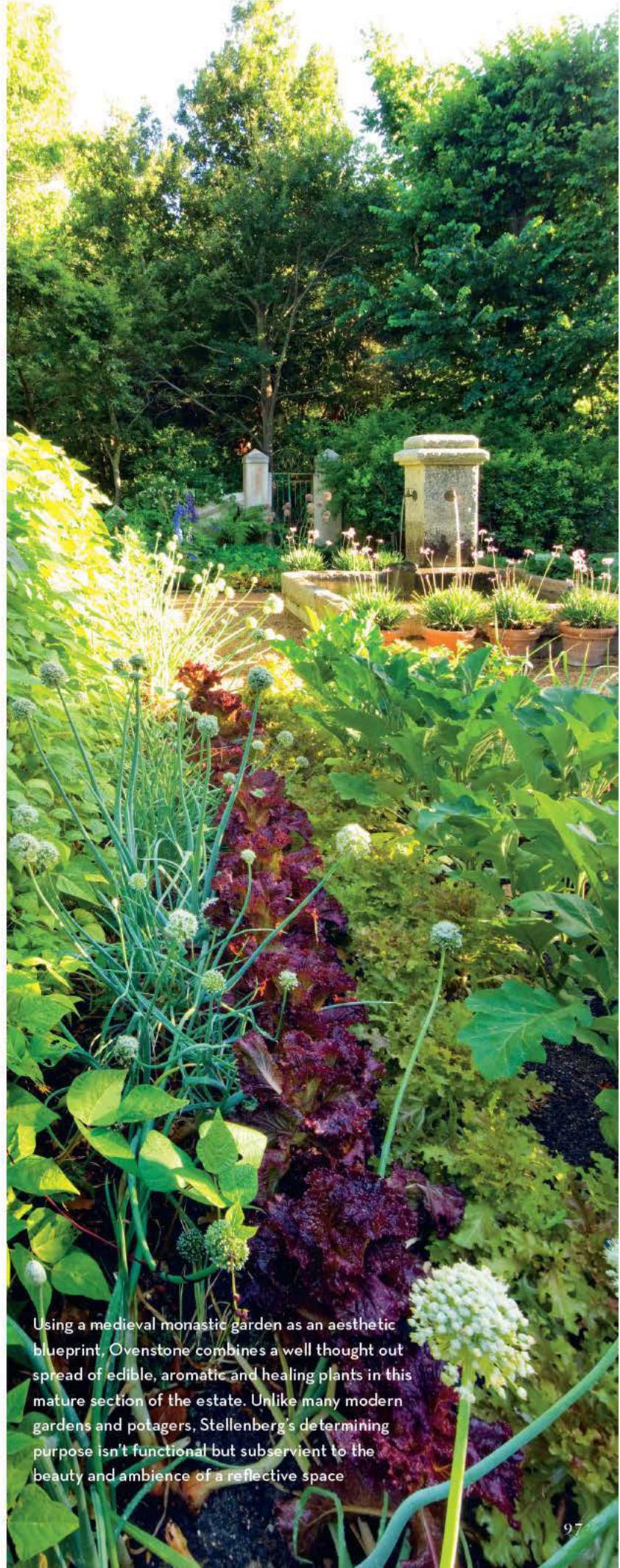
IN THE HERB SECTION UNUSUAL VARIETIES ABOUND

In ancient monastic gardens herbs were propagated to fulfil specific symbolic and functional purposes. **▀ Utility and Beauty** These archetypal plants were used for culinary purposes to mask unpleasant odours and repel insects. **▀ Nature's Apothecary** The monastery's herb garden reflected a concern for self-healing. Therefore, many herbs were cultivated as natural remedies and used to treat a host of illnesses. **▀ Herbaceous Infusion** The herbal quadrant of Stellenberg's vegetable garden relives this tradition with the following seasonal herbs: alecost, bergamot, blood-leaved sorrel, bronze fennel, horsetail, rosemary, southernwood, selfheal, sweet woodruff and thyme.



THE VEGETABLE AREA IS A HIVE OF CLEVER PLANTING

▀ Companion Planting Sweet basil is planted next to tomatoes as it enhances the taste of the fruit and the pungent foliage repels insects. **▀ Crop Rotation** Soil health is key and crop rotation helps ensure that minerals, like nitrogen, are replenished. Here, aubergines are planted after onions, peas follow onions and leeks, while carrots are planted after tomatoes. Wood ash adds potassium to the soil for sweet roots like carrots. **▀ Seasonal Varieties** The vegetable spread includes the *Alliaceae* family (garlic and onions), the *Solanaceae* family (tomatoes and aubergines) and the *Brassicaceae* family (cabbages and cauliflowers) as well as beans and root crops, such as carrots, and leaf crops, which include various lettuce varieties and spinach.



Using a medieval monastic garden as an aesthetic blueprint, Ovenstone combines a well thought out spread of edible, aromatic and healing plants in this mature section of the estate. Unlike many modern gardens and potagers, Stellenberg's determining purpose isn't functional but subservient to the beauty and ambience of a reflective space



Without losing its charm, bamboo trellises have replaced traditional medieval willow or birch saplings. The French call this reworking and restoration of historical gardens a continuation

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Notably, this garden is not only aesthetically pleasing but it is also filled with sacred archetypal symbolism found in the Christian religion. The fountain is symbolic of God as an infinite source of life, while the gravel pathways diverging from the fountain are in the form of the cross, a symbolic crossroads. These walkways are ideal for slow pacing, reflecting a time when monks traditionally paced the paths to the length of a paternoster or a decade of the rosary. In turn, these contemplative paths divide the plot into four beds, reminiscent of the four corners of the earth.

'The trick was to keep the patterning of the design fairly complex and repetitive but the detailing simple and slightly naïve, and to use materials that weren't modern,' says Watson. The pattern reads well

from above, as husband Andrew's office windows overlook this section of the garden.

Achieving it, however, was not that simple as the ground had to be levelled and a retaining wall built. 'These medieval gardens are almost always enclosed by walls, which were luckily already present at Stellenberg,' notes Watson. She adds that the Ovenstones also found the 19th-century Provençale gate – one of the garden's key decorative features – in France.

The fruits of garden maintenance guru, Caroline Magowan and her team's hard labour is evident in the elaborate assortment of espaliered fruit trees, vegetables and herbs, which grow with zeal. While trying to stay true to the original monastic blueprint, the garden is constantly evolving and uses nature as a compass.



A BOWER OF SWEET-SMELLING ANNUALS AND ROSES

▀ **Sacred Flowers** The flower garden at a medieval monastery was the domain of the sacristan, the monk in charge of holy objects. Within the confounds of this scented-flower garden, he grew a rich array of annuals and roses, which were used to decorate sacred places, such as the high altar. ▀ **Floral Profusion** Annuals include alliums, dahlias, delphiniums, foxgloves, salvias, St Joseph's lilies, nasturtiums and potted wild garlic (*Tulbaghia*). ▀ **Functional Favourites** Marigolds are planted for both their colour and insect-detering properties. ▀ **Heaven Scent** Olfactory senses are pleased by rustic old-school Gallic roses, such as the soft shell-pink rose, 'Sharifa Asma', which was chosen for its alluring perfume.



▀ Globular alliums, violet and mauve delphiniums and wild garlic add pockets of interest

Thus, governed by the seasons, tasks are timed according to the climate and soil, which ensure year-round bumper crops.

In midsummer neat rows of lettuce, tomatoes and aromatic herbs grow with gusto. Scattered between dense foliage, patina-skinned aubergines glow in the morning sun.

During the winter months, which are filled with icy winds and lashings of rain, the summer spread is replaced with a profusion of marrows, pattypan, legumes (broad beans and peas), as well as potatoes and members of the *Brassicaceae* family, like the 'Romanesco' cauliflower.

Space is a factor and every inch of the vegetable patch is put to good use. Magowan, for instance, uses a clever combination of low rows of green and red lettuce and tall accents, such as beans and aubergines climbing on tapering bamboo trelliswork, to maximise the area. Crops are grown in tightly packed rows, where as little soil as possible is left bare. Planted on the diagonal, the rows run along the length of the plot, drawing the eye onwards and making the garden appear longer than it is.

Additional planting space was cleverly created by introducing woven baskets to the garden as well as black-wattle planters, which further heighten the vertical interest.

Steering clear of modern hybridised seed, most plants in the garden are heirloom varieties, which are nutrient rich but slower growing. This bountiful plot of land has seen purple cauliflowers bloom, as well as stout black radishes and other old-fashioned greens from the European sprout. Although the garden bears host to a range of fancy vegetables, like trusses of fleshy pleated 'Russe' tomatoes, local varieties of lettuce, leeks and onions are also planted, says Magowan.

The assortment of plants were not only chosen for their useful medicinal and edible properties but also for their aesthetic value. Colour, shape and texture are key and here everything works in perfect unison to create a micro-cosmos of rich hues. Waves of annuals, such as cream and salmon dahlias, foxgloves and violet delphiniums, add seasonal colour and are ideal for cut flowers. The array of old-fashioned flowers add patches of textural interest to the fruit section as well.

'Except for the flowers, the garden is 95-per-cent organic,' says Magowan, as she closely inspects the vegetables, her well-trained eye scouting for any unwanted intruders. Generally there aren't too many insects that prey on the abundant spread but when the odd infestation does occur, she uses a variety of organic insecticides.

To further deter unwanted visitors, like leaf miners, vegetables of the same family are not planted together, while broad beans are grown with members of the onion family.

Magowan and her team also apply crop rotation to ensure that the garden remains healthy. 'We try not to plant the same plants on the same spot during one year,' notes Magowan. Although the garden is too small to allow for the occasional fallow bed, tomatoes are planted after broad beans. 'Broad beans harness nitrogen from the air,' explains Magowan, adding that this planting system also confuses six-legged impostors.

'The secret to a lush vegetable garden is dealing with problems as soon as you notice them. It's about being in the garden as often as possible,' Magowan admits. 'Although, green fingers do help.' Another secret to an abundant garden is to regularly enrich the soil with kraal manure and compost. 'It's a process of trial and error,' Magowan notes. The result of this trial: C'est magnifique.

▀ Stellenberg Gardens and Nursery ☎ 021 761 2948