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Few things are more attractive than a flower border devoted to a single colour. The White Garden at Stellenberg Estate features a floral fusion of pale-tinted appeal. Each year new plants are added to the borders, while unsuccessful specimens are removed, ensuring that the garden remains current and interesting

THE DAZZLE *of a* WHITE GARDEN

Cocooned in the heart of Stellenberg Estate in Cape Town, two gardens – one formal and structured, the other romantic and free flowing – showcase the allure of an all-white palette

TEXT KARIEN SLABBERT PHOTOGRAPHS ALAIN PROUST



Although colour is the most prominent aesthetic device, the design also revolves around eye-catching silhouettes

GARDENING DOYENNE Sandy Ovenstone's landscaping philosophy is to craft each section of Stellenberg Estate with a specific mood in mind, exuding a sense of gracious abundance. Its famous White Garden – the second oldest section of this historic estate – boasts a painterly ensemble of pale-tinted blooms.

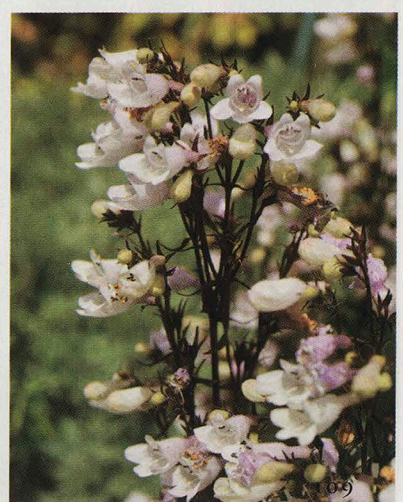
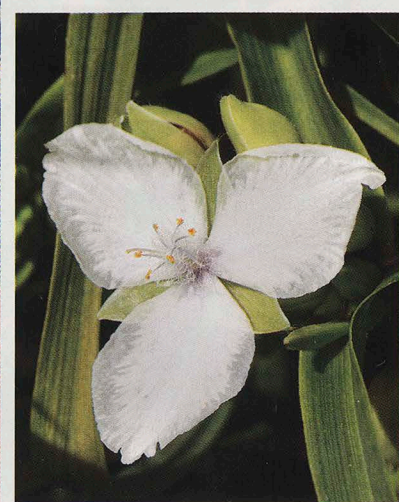
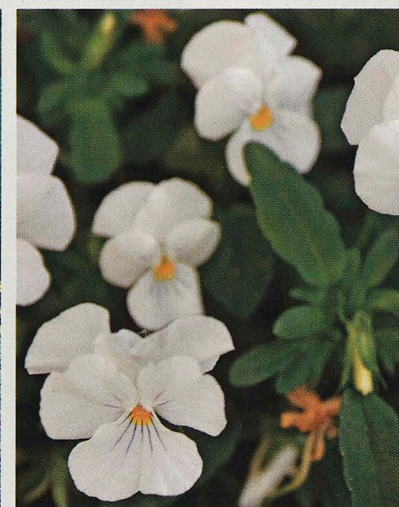
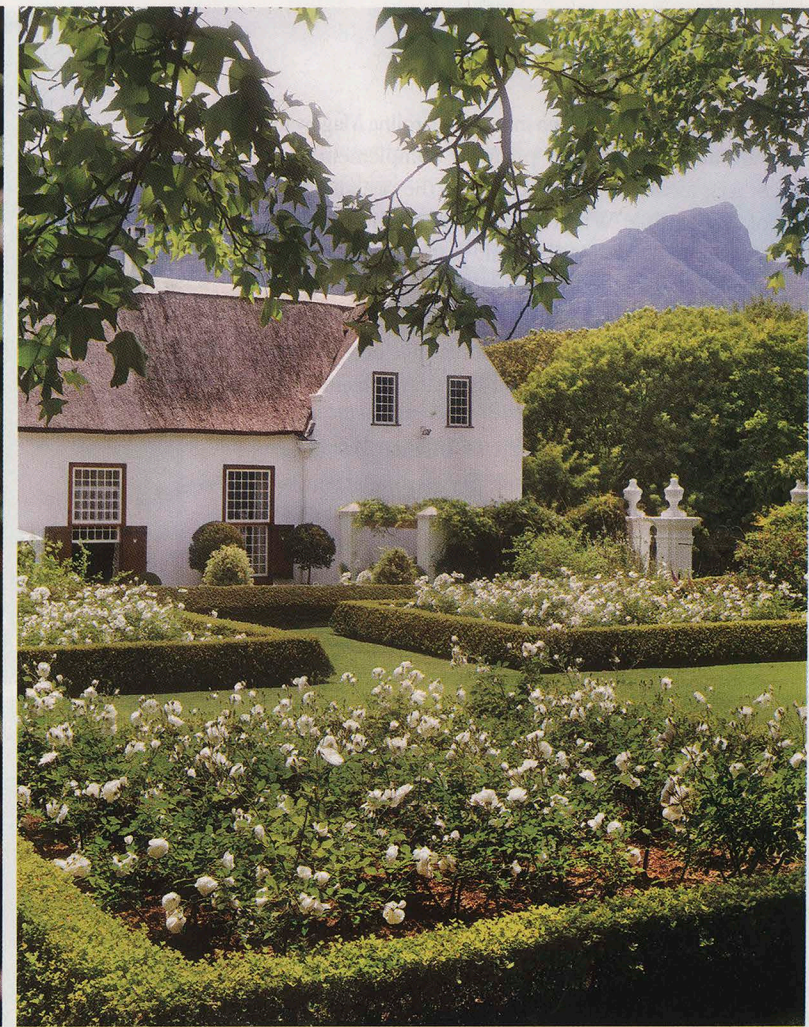
From the long paved flagstone entertainment area, lined with well-manicured bay trees, small-leaved myrtle and *Rhus crenata* hedges, one's eye darts over the lush spread. What could be more stylish than a serene ensemble of ethereal blooms on your doorstep? Ovenstone agrees. 'I love the feeling of green, white and cream next to the house,' she notes, referring to their 18th-century Dutch homestead.

The paper-white borders' allure transcends daylight hours. The White Garden, or Moon Garden as Ovenstone calls it, has an unrivalled after-dark appeal, when the veil of silver-tinted flowers and foliage are etched out in the moonlight. 'The garden truly comes alive at night when it is filled with soft mystery,' she muses. 'This is when the grey-hued *Lycbnis*, *Salvia* and *Artemesia* show their true colours.'

What started out as an ad-hoc mass planting of Iceberg roses and petunias has since evolved into an epitome of colour-coded planting. In this narrow courtyard, two symmetrical mixed borders now overflow with a fusion of pale roses, perennials and shrubs, with the odd bulb and annual to add seasonal interest. ▶

ABOVE The walled White Garden maintains a sense of scale and intimacy. A wrought-iron gate at the end of the long narrow strip provides access to the rest of the garden **OPPOSITE PAGE** **CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** Star-shaped columbines (*Aquilegia*) add angular interest; the formal parterre exudes a sense of timeless gravitas. The classic 18th-century

Dutch homestead serves as backdrop; plants are chosen for colour, shape and texture: pansies; *Armeria maritima*; *Deutzia scabra*; *Tradescantia virginiana*; at the heart of the two mixed borders, a dove-grey bench flanked by two star jasmine pillars and a well-manicured *Viburnum* hedge create structure, symmetry and balance, enticing visitors to linger a while longer



CAPE GARDEN

Ovenstone and garden manager Caroline Magowan carefully choose each plant to complement the others, as well as to contribute to the overall effect of this setting. When asked whether the planting scheme is always meticulously planned, Ovenstone explains, 'It's mostly a question of trial and error. As we use a lot of herbaceous perennials, the garden changes every year.' This ensures that new plants, such as *Euphorbia* 'Diamond Frost', are mixed with old favourites.

An enclosed space, such as this narrow linear courtyard, dictates that one pays strong attention to detail, while establishing a sense of contained abundance. In this way, well-considered plant combinations and a strong focus on tonal variations form a sinuous dynamic.

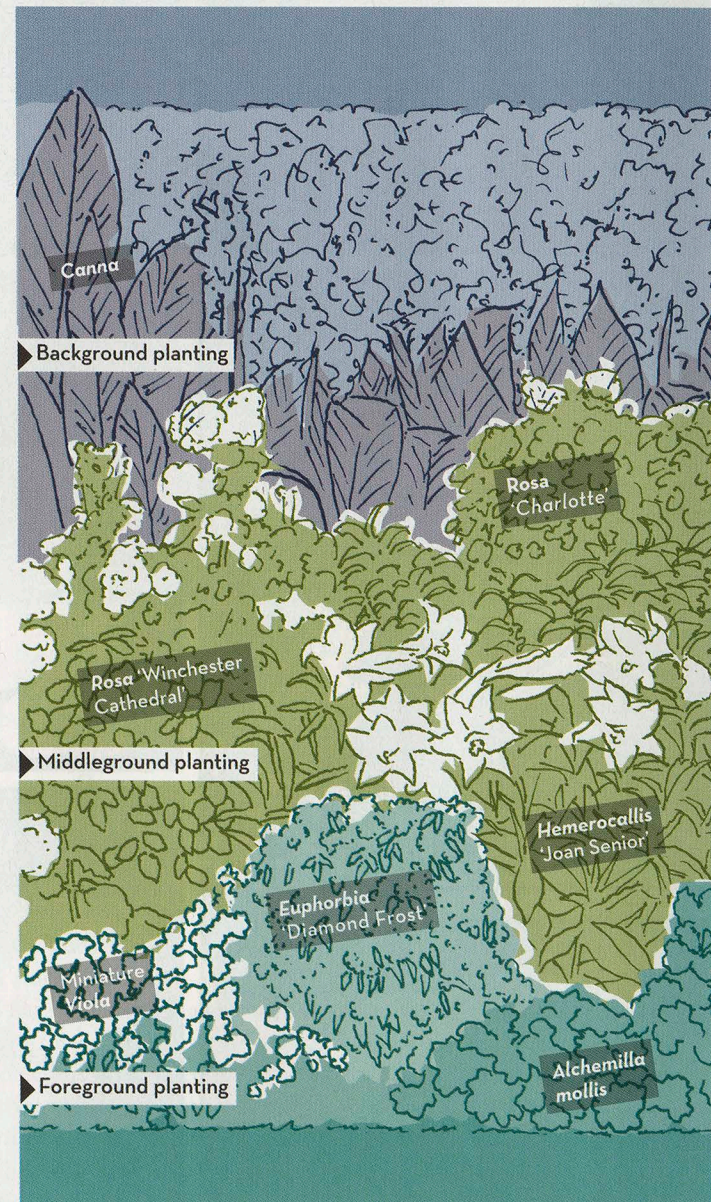
Cool chalky hues in the form of *Campanula persicifolia* and *Hebe* 'White' are combined with warm buttery tones, such as *Hemerocallis* 'Joan Senior' and the apricot-hued David Austin rose 'Charlotte'. While subtle pockets of colour (silver *Artemisia*, zesty lime-green *Alchemilla mollis*, soft-pink *Deutzia scabra* and bronze fennel) punctuate the ocean of white.

Although colour is the most prominent aesthetic device, the design also revolves around eye-catching silhouettes – form, structure, shape and texture are key design elements. Likewise, height and the repetition of plants create a sense of synchronicity.

Strong textural accents – drifts of velvety *Salvia leucantha* 'White', cottonball-soft *Philadelphus* and *Euphorbia* 'Diamond Frost' with its mass of pint-sized blooms – all contribute to this whimsical masterpiece. In addition to these veils of texture, shape forms a key cornerstone with pom-pom-shaped *Achillea ptarmica* and globular *Armeria maritima* interspersed with nodding *Aquilegia* Songbird 'White' and pale hellebores. While spikes and spires, such as *Penstemon digitalis* 'Husker's Red', *Verbascum chaixii* var. *Album* and *Campanula persicifolia*, rise like sentries from the abundantly planted borders. These structural plants have outspoken personalities and they tend to dominate the planting visually, therefore filler plants are used to help create a sense of continuity.

Importantly, a canvas of various foliage shapes ensures rich textural layering. From sharp and angular artichokes and *Agapanthus nana* 'White' to clipped shapes, like *Hebe* 'White', all add substance to some of the loose romantic combinations, bridging the divide between harmonious and more dramatic compositions.

A spindly mass of bronze fennel leaves is almost transparent in quality, providing hazy screens with glimpses of white-tinted blooms as a backdrop. These wispy curtains have a non-invasive appeal and are ideal companions to monochrome borders.



PLANTING PLAN

DESIGN The design of the two long narrow beds is simple, yet effective. They are divided into front, middle and back sections – small plants in front, medium-sized ones in the middle and tall varieties to the back of the border.

SUCCESSION

Flowering succession is key; among the early bloomers are *Ranunculus*, *Penstemon digitalis* and *Aquilegia*, while *Physostegia virginiana* Alba, *Phlox maculata* and *cannas* reach their peak later in the season.

FOLIAGE Although often overshadowed by their floral counterparts, Ovenstone believes that greenery has a strong (often underestimated) aesthetic value and is pivotal in establishing tonal interest. A canvas of green and grey leaves is therefore not only one of the signature elements in the White Garden, but throughout the entire estate.

ILLUSTRATION: SAREL GREYLING

GROUND RULES

According to Ovenstone, when it comes to mixed herbaceous borders, there is always the temptation to plant all year round. However, she believes that the soil needs time to recuperate. 'We are determined to rest the

soil and there is no planting until spring, while from April to June we do all the pruning. In the winter we take out and divide all the perennials. We put them in bags and leave them until the following season. This also helps keep the perennials from becoming woody.'

BELOW Although colour is used sparingly in the White Garden, rich layers of textural contrast ensure a striking display LEFT The two pale-thread gardens at Stellenberg are situated next to each other

Adjacent to the White Garden, a flourish of white roses highlights yet another pale planting palette. It is more structured, but equally impressive.

In contrast to the free-flowing nature of its neighbour, the formal parterre that lies next to the boxed hedges with roses combines traditional elements with a modernistic approach. 'A garden with a forward-looking spirit flanking the old homestead,' as Ovenstone puts it.

This ethereal garden room started out as a double English border. However, Ovenstone soon decided to move away from complicated garden design to a more unperturbed approach. Indeed, she has managed to create two dramatically different garden rooms with one vision: to showcase the various personas of white, from cloudlike to structural and stalwart.

■ Stellenberg Gardens and Nurseries ☎ 021 761 2948

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