

Museum's Hidden Gardens showcasing local ecology and culture

Drs Sue and Richard Dean

The Sonoran Desert Museum in Arizona has an unusual botanical garden that displays the soils, rocks and plants to be seen from the slopes of the high mountains to the dry river beds that run through the valleys of this desert region. We visited this garden in 1993 and on our return spent much time enthusing about it to Pat Marincowitz, Merino sheep farmer and local veld plant expert from the farm Kleinsleutelfontein.

Pat and I decided that we would create a garden that displayed the rocks, soil and plants from the Swartberg, the koppies and plains around the town, and from the dry river beds to the north of the town. The garden was developed at the Tourism Bureau next to the Fransie Pienaar Museum. Pat spent many months carting rocks and soil from his farm and various other sites and supplied all the plants from his farm and his indigenous garden.

At last, the garden was completed in April 1996 (see *Prince Albert Friend* 19, May 1996, page 10). It included 98 plant species each with a numbered metal marker. We designed a pamphlet describing each plant and this was made available at the Museum. Gardens need care so Pat and Sue, together with the museum gardener maintained it for the first five years. When Sue left the town to teach in Stellenbosch for a few years, the garden care was taken over by Reinwald Dedekind, a succulent and cycad specialist, who also developed an Aloe garden along the pavement in front of the museum.

Some years later in July 2010, shortly after Sue and Richard Dean founded Renu-Karoo Nursery, assisted by Renu-Karoo staff and interns, they set up another garden behind the museum. This displays the indigenous medicinal plants used in the local community.

The Garden was funded by Rufford Small grants in the UK, and a pamphlet describing the uses of the plants is available from the Tourism Bureau. This garden has been the focus of a number of talks and demonstrations presented to schools and the general public by Renu-Karoo interns and employees, explaining the use of medicinal plants (*Prince Albert Vriend* 163, June 2010, page 19).

Both the indigenous and medicinal gardens are tourism and educational assets for Prince Albert. However, both are in need of attention. Renu-Karoo can supply all the succulents, shrubs and grasses needed to create an attractive and informative outdoor diorama showcasing the local indigenous flora and culturally-important plants. Judy Maguire will ensure that the gardens also inform visitors about the rocks making up our landscape. We have therefore applied to the Gouritz Cluster Biosphere Reserve for funding to revitalise the gardens and include weather-proof labelling for the plants and rocks on display. If the funding application is successful, the town can look forward to a revival of these gardens, but the displays will depend also on interested volunteers for maintenance.

If you would like to be involved in some way in the gardens, signage, pamphlet development or maintenance, either through practical contributions or donations, please contact Sue Dean (renukaroo@gmail.com) or Judy Maguire (judymaguireza@gmail.com). ■

We have just received the good news that our application for funding from the board of GCBR Flexible Micro Fund has been approved.



Indigenous garden at the Tourism Bureau. Photo: Dr Sue Dean



School visit (pre-Covid) to the medicinal garden behind the museum. Photo: Dr Sue Dean