



# A city heirloom

The new Dutch Garden in The Company's Garden takes the city back to its vegetable-growing origins – and aims to educate the public on organic food production and the nutritional advantages of heirloom cultivars. **By John Richardson**

**S**ix days of wind has blown all the peas, now beautifully in flower, to bits. Radish, spinach, endive and other seed, fortunately half ripe, suffered no damage.”

This lament could so easily be that of any Cape Town gardener on any given day just last week – but it's not. It's the slightly peeved note in the diary of the city's first veggie gardener, one Johan Anthoniszoon van Riebeeck, recorded on 30 December 1652, just a few months after he arrived in the Cape.

Of course it wasn't all gloomy. There were other, happier entries from Jan. Like this one from 4 September of the same year. “We have eaten pinky thickness carrots and our first peas. Turnips, cabbage, wheat, barley, grey peas, sown last month doing well.” Or the even more upbeat entry from 16 July 1652: “Beds of cauliflower, lettuce, radish and other vegetables planted. Wild asparagus from the veld planted into the garden a great success – served daily at the table.”

Walking to The Company's Garden, surrounded by the usual weekday rumble of cars and people, it's hard to imagine that this city grew from such unassuming beginnings. But it did. Cape Town was for all intents and purposes firstly a simple vegetable garden from

which to supply ships sailing between Europe and the Far East with fresh fruit and vegetables.

“You can see social history in the gardens,” says Rory Phelan, the city's Manager of The Company's Garden. “Most interesting from a landscape design perspective is the evidence of two very different garden styles overlaid on one another.”

The original Dutch design was a distinctly formal style, with strong parallel avenues running in a north/south direction intersected by secondary axes in the form of rills, paths and hedges to create rectilinear spaces. While this layout naturally reflects the working-space function of the garden, it was also very much in accord with the customary Baroque approach to landscape layouts of the period. Indeed landscape architect André Le Nôtre was establishing the gardens of Versailles at much the same time that Van Riebeeck was laying out the framework for his far more modest, but arguably equally influential, garden in the Cape. Even in the late 1700s, when the gardens no longer needed to be a fresh produce ‘farm’ and were converted into a botanical and ornamental park, the layout remained clearly Dutch Baroque.

“All this changed when the British took over in the early 1800s,” says Rory. “It was then that the

## HEIRLOOM VEGETABLES

What constitutes an heirloom vegetable? One school of thought places an age, or date, on the plant, with many considering 1951 to be the latest year a plant can have originated and still be called an heirloom, since that year marked the widespread introduction of hybrid varieties.

Another definition uses the word “heirloom” in its truest sense and says a heirloom plant is a cultivar that has been nurtured, selected and handed down from one generation to another.

What is agreed, however, is that heirloom varieties, by definition, must be open-pollinated, and bred and stabilised using classic breeding practices. This means that the seeds will produce plants with most of the characteristics of the parent plant. Without the ongoing growing and storage of heirloom plants, food growers would be entirely dependent on seed distributors for future crops because most, if not all, hybrid plants, if regrown, will not be the same as the original hybrid plant.

## THE MAKINGS OF A HERITAGE VEGETABLE GARDEN

Urban Landscape Solutions was appointed by the City of Cape Town to build the new Dutch Garden. "It was a very exciting project to be involved in," says the company's owner, Eric Cherry. "The Company's Garden is the oldest garden in South Africa and of huge historical importance. It is also important to me that it will have an educational role, teaching visitors not only about organic food gardening, but also promoting the use of heirloom vegetables, which have much better nutritional values."

### Demolition and earthwork

Monterama were subcontracted to demolish the building and car park that were on the site, and excavated to a depth of 600mm. Because of the historical nature of the site, excavation had to be done in 150mm layers with sample trenches inspected by the heritage council for any historical artefacts.

### Hard landscaping

Once the site was clear, construction of the water channels, ponds and seating began. These were built in compacted layers and using brickwork built on solid foundations. The brickwork was then cladded with sandstone rocks, sourced from the Bredasdorp area, which had been stockpiled from wheat fields 200 years ago. This was done to give the cladding an old look and feel. Pathways were built up with compacted sand and finished with laterite with a cement mix.

The arbours, pergolas and fences were built with treated turned poles supplied by The Pole Yard.

### Planting

The soil mixer was specially made by Reliance Compost and included sandy topsoil and a fine compost mix. The mulch added to the landscaped area was also supplied by Reliance.

Urban Landscape Solutions' sister company, New Horizon Farm-Nursery supplied the seeds for the heirloom and old-style vegetables, as well as the landscaping plants.



garden became more curvilinear, inspired by the work of British landscape architects such as Lancelot "Capability" Brown, who favoured a much more naturalistic layout."

Much of what is seen today is reminiscent of the sweeping changes made during the Victorian era, when landscape preferences turned emphatically towards the picturesque. The head gardener at the time, James McGibbon, overlaid the Dutch geometry with curving paths, expansive lawns, buoyant shrubbery and many large specimen trees, sourced from the significant extents of the British Empire.

Now styles are shifting yet again. City Parks and Cape Town's Environmental and Heritage Management have collaborated to create a brand new vegetable garden, designed very much in the spirit and form, if not the scale, of Van Riebeeck's original garden. "Almost all evidence of the early Dutch characteristic had been lost from the gardens for a long time," says Rory, "and we wanted to reintroduce an element of it, specifically as a vegetable garden in order to make it as close to the original as possible."

Designed by heritage professional Phillip Smith, a landscape architect working for the city, the new Dutch Garden is based on the orderly and workman-like spaces of the typical Dutch Baroque kitchen garden. A great deal of historical research went into its design, which features strong rectilinear lines on both the horizontal and vertical planes, windbreak hedges and timber arbours and frames for vines, berries and other fruits. A stone rill, or 'gracht' as the Dutch would have called it, forms the central axis, expanding into a circular pond where it meets a perpendicular axis that aligns with the centre of the adjacent rose garden, planted in 1929. Timber bridges provide access across the rill, while stone walls double as seating.

It will function as a kitchen garden supplying fresh produce to the new restaurant that is currently under construction. "The garden will also be used to educate visitors, specifically school children on permaculture practices at a grass roots level," adds Rory, "demonstrating how these practices can help future societies realise food security, resource management and ultimately improve local nutrition and health." 69