

# Cape Town's Company's Garden's

## Dutch Garden Historical and futuristic

By Carol Posthumus

The VOC Vegetable Garden in the Company's Garden, Cape Town.  
Photo by Bruce Sutherland, City of Cape Town

**T**he Company's Garden is a well-known urban green space in the heart of the city of Cape Town. With families strolling around and children delighting in the squirrels, ducks and flocks of tame pigeons, it is always a pleasure to visit. Bridal parties and languidly strolling couples give the Company's Garden – especially when the roses are in bloom – an air of occasion. It is also naturally popular with tourists.

The Company's Garden – surrounded by museums and big old trees – has a historical feel, and from 2014 it has also had its own food garden, the new Dutch or VOC Vegetable Garden, which recreates elements of the original 1652 garden back to life in a new design. It's a bit of living history, which at the same time encourages food gardening in the urban space and the development of urban community gardening (critical as 70% of South Africans now live in urban settings and should be considering starting their own veggie patch).

While the VOC Vegetable Garden sets out to encourage urban food farming, it also hopes to promote a "return to the fundamentals of living and an appreciation of the land and the need for stewardship of the environment for balanced living in the urban environment". Nurturing green and food growing space in the frenetic pace of cities is increasingly vital.

### Refreshment station

The VOC (acronym for Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie) Garden was probably the first formal vegetable garden in South Africa. The local Gorinhaiqua had moreover long used Table Valley for the good grazing of Renosterbos and the sweet spring waters of the area for their cattle and sheep. The Dutch sailing merchants, decided to set up a refreshment station, or a vegetable garden, in the Cape Town area in 1652. The perennial springs, arising from rainfall filtered through the upper ramparts of the sandstone of Table Mountain, were an important feature drawing people to the area.

The sailors were dying of scurvy on their long voyages to the East and back to Europe, and a vegetable garden would provide the fresh vegetables necessary to give them the Vitamin C they

needed. Stories are legend from the time of ships arriving in ports in faraway places with loads of spices and sadly many dead sailors. In some cases the treasures on board would have included cloves. If they had realised that cloves were rich in Vitamin C, this could have saved them. However, in the case of the Dutch sailors' nutrition and Vitamin C, Hendrik Boom, the VOC's first gardener in the Cape was tasked with growing vegetables and fruit in the foreign clime. Boom was in fact a Master Gardener in Holland, and had been in charge of the Botanical Gardens in Amsterdam, and was dispatched to the Cape with the responsibility to start a nutritional garden.

To educate the present city of Cape Town citizenry about urban food farming techniques and methods, regular courses are held for the public at the Dutch Garden. Many groups of school children also visit the garden during the year, Rory Phelan, the City of Cape Town's manager of The Company's Garden says. The produce in the garden is also sold at a "Farmer's Market" held every Saturday and the vegetables supply the restaurant in The Company's Garden.

### Dutch water channels

The VOC Vegetable Garden is situated on the site of the old conservatory and a car park. The design, says Phelan, reflects the original Dutch Baroque layout, with the stone-lined open irrigation channels. The new VOC Garden has channels recalling the Dutch "leiwater" or water channels, providing water via flood irrigation. But most often watering is done with hosepipes. The water comes from the Stadsfontein spring in Oranjezicht or the "Vineyard" spring. The irrigation system is based on the original irrigation system installed by Jan van Riebeeck.

A system of stone channels – inspired by the original ‘gragten’ of the garden – have created a gravity-fed irrigation system, that are operated by a series of sluice gates (pretty to watch but takes a few hours to operate). The attractive stone channels run on a central axis through the garden with ponds, with timber bridges, reflecting the earthy tones of the garden. The ponds allow for reflection and seem to attract the geese too.

The Garden’s design was informed by historical maps, drawings, paintings and town plans, as the City of Cape Town’s City Parks Department and Environment & Heritage Management Branch set about their work on the project in 2001. Their resultant design strongly recreates the Baroque Dutch design of the original garden, however this very formal geometrical discipline is overlaid with a more flowing Victorian style curvilinear design, elaborates Phelan.

The result of the new Dutch Garden design is a garden of a very pleasant scale, which is linear and workmanlike but also free-flowing. The Baroque period was all about “control of Nature” while the Victorian era was typified by “working with Nature”. The garden is about 1 750 square metres and was designed by heritage professional landscape architect Phillip Smith.

The Dutch Garden contains edible vegetables and fruits, as well as medicinal indigenous and culinary herbs. There is an emphasis on heirloom varieties. The city’s gardeners propagated cuttings from historic fruit trees (for instance, the old pear and mulberry trees) in the Company’s Gardens as well as in and about Cape Town, for example from the old vine at Heritage Square in Bree Street. The saffron pear tree in the Company’s Garden is thought to be the oldest cultivated tree in South Africa. In the original Company’s Garden there were many citrus trees. In fact, Government Avenue now resplendent with Oak trees was first lined with citrus trees.



Canal system based on the Dutch lei water system

## Flourishing

There are many varieties of vegetables, including celery, radishes, onions, leeks, cabbages, lettuce and peas. There is a berry section, with blueberries, raspberries, gooseberries and strawberries. There is an orchard section with peach, plum, apple, pear, quince and citrus trees, some grown in an espalier style – flat against the trellis work, which is characteristic of ancient methods of fruit tree cultivation. It feels like a very flourishing garden when one visits, with lots of healthy, fruitful looking plants, bees and butterflies. Phelan says the medicinal beds of the garden draw good interest

from the public. Indeed, the day I visited, there were several people closely examining and reading the signs depicting the name and use of the various plants, from rose geranium to buchu and lavender. Natural healing is indeed fascinating to us all, it seems. Several tourists wandered around the food gardens, with the odd squirrel and Egyptian goose.

Landscape architect Eric Cherry, CEO and owner of Urban Landscape Solutions, tells us that it was an honour for his company to do the landscaping installation for such an immensely historical and important educational project. In 2014 the Dutch Garden was one of Cape Town’s Design Capital of the World projects.

“It was an exciting project to work on. It is super that the new Dutch Garden is used for educational purposes, to encourage the healthy practise of urban food gardening and the use of heirlooms in urban farming. I like the ethos of the garden which espouses the use of heirloom seeds, which are excellent nutritionally. Of course, to work on a garden recreating the oldest garden in South Africa was a special experience.”

Cherry says the Dutch Gardens was an interesting installation, given its historical setting. Their work started from the demolition of the building and the car park, down to 600cm. They needed to excavate in layers of 150mm, with sample trenches being inspected by the Heritage Council for any historical artefacts.



Eric Cherry of Urban Landscape Solutions worked on the Award-winning Dutch Gardens.

## Award winning

Once the site was cleared, the hard landscaping proceeded, with construction of the channels, ponds and seating. The brickwork was clad with sandstone rocks, sourced from Bredasdorp area, rocks which had been stockpiled 200 years ago. The cladding gives the brickwork an old look and feel.

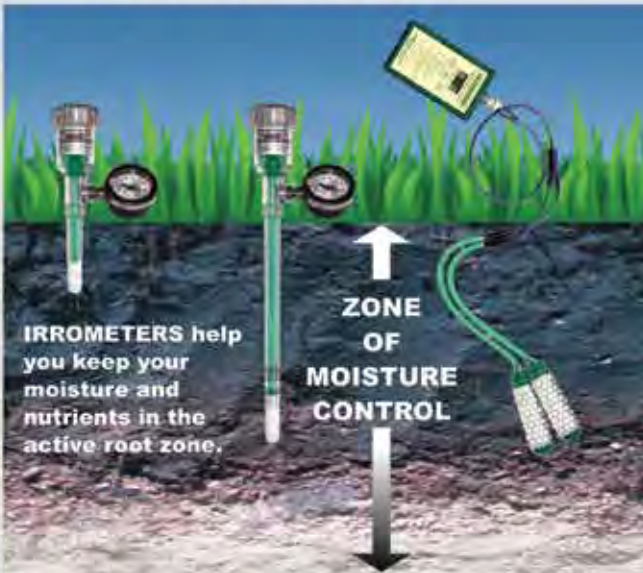
A special soil mix, specially made by Reliance Compost, was applied in the beds, and included a sandy topsoil and a fine compost mix. A mulch was added to the landscaped area,

also supplied by Reliance.

“The Dutch Garden has added a wonderful new element to the Company’s Gardens,” says Cherry.

Notably, Urban Landscape Solutions’ building of the Dutch Garden won three South African Landscapers Institute (SALI) Awards in 2015. Urban Landscape Solutions have won 52 Awards for their work on a variety of projects, with 43 of these accolades being won in the last four years.

A legendary landscaper Eric Cherry was honoured with an Honorary Achievement Lifetime Award, at a relatively young age, from SALI in 2014, for his incredible work in landscaping. Cherry has worked on some breath-taking landscaping projects since he became a landscaper after completing his studies as a horticulturist in 1979. His work has included projects such as the magical garden paradise of the Lost City at Sun City for Sol Kerzner to the Cape Town Green Point Urban Park (an amazing modern park) and the gardens of the One & Only Hotel in the Mother City. The rehabilitation of the Lourens River is yet another high profile project Cherry and his team worked on.



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Cherry's great passion for landscaping started when he was 7 years old, when he was already growing his own plants and "cutting the lawn every day." He believes it is important to introduce children to the gardening culture from young. "Every new generation needs to be introduced to the culture of growing. As more people live in the city now, it is becoming vital for people to understand that it is healthy and a good idea to grow your own patch of vegetables."



↑Above:- View from the medicinal plant section of the Dutch Garden.  
↓Below:- The healing herbs attract much interest.



**Sustainability is key**

"If more people became gardeners, fewer people would suffer depression. Most gardeners do not suffer from depressive thoughts. Plants connect us to nature and ground us in important ways. You cannot but help having positive thoughts if you work in a garden."

Cherry owns New Horizon Nursery, which is situated on a farm. "I love the farm, it is a big garden for me to work in!" he enthuses with a chuckle. Cherry says he likes to collect large trees and has rehabilitated a lot of fynbos in the country environment and is also keen on his succulent garden on the farm.

Sustainability is the key word for gardening going forward. Water-wise plants and smaller, sustainable gardens with more use of hard landscaping are trends going forward in South Africa, he says.

Any tips for aspirant landscapers? "I am stubborn I don't give up – perhaps this is a good characteristic for landscapers. I would advise anyone wanting to develop a career in landscaping to make a decision to learn from the very best and start off working for the very best in the game. I started with Fred Badenhorst in the 80s, and that was an excellent start, and, of course, you have to be passionate about what you are doing." shares Cherry, who has a vibrant intern programme in Urban Landscaping Solutions.

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