

FERNKLOOF TURNS

FIFTY



Some call it the best kept secret in the Cape; for botanists it is one of the 'hottest' of the Cape Floral Kingdom 'hotspots'. Either way, Fernkloof Nature Reserve, turning 50 in 2007, is a very special asset to the coastal resort of Hermanus.

In 1957 only the mountains were the same. There were no stone buildings housing herbarium, office and lecture hall, no visitors' centre to inform and direct – and most important, no graded paths to lead visitors through the fynbos splendours. Inside the present entrance a gravel pit and brickmaking site scarred the hillside.



Beside the bokkie and baboon population, only some intrepid farmers drove their sheep over the mountain in search of fresh grazing, braving the odd predatory lynx and leopard.

Driving force behind the establishment of a nature reserve came from the Mayor of Hermanus, Otto Prillewitz, who in late 1957 persuaded the municipality to allot 100 hectares to this project. The sundial in front of the Botanical Centre pays tribute to the man responsible for the Fernkloof Nature Reserve.

“First curator was Harry Wood,” says Frank Woodvine, former curator of the reserve and now a member of the Fernkloof Advisory Board in his retirement. “His job was to create a garden with plants native to the Caledon division. But such was his enthusiasm that trees and flowers from as far away as Eastern Cape and Natal were introduced – even a thriving bauhinia from India!”

Rockeries, flowerbeds, paths and ponds were laid out and enjoyed by everyone. A pipeline was installed to bring water from the Rockfill Dam.

A small nursery on the gravel pit site was established to grow the required plants. Water came from a well just behind where the Botanical Centre now stands.

Harry Wood (not to be confused with the Stanford farmer of the same name who was a member of the Fernkloof Advisory Board in the 1980’s) travelled daily from his small isolated cottage at Rooiels to Fernkloof.

As he was only paid a hundred pounds a month, petrol must have been a lot cheaper then! Later a curator’s cottage was built but Harry’s office-cum-workshop was a donated wooden shed until the Botanical Centre was built in the late 1970s. Quote for the Fernkloof Hall in 1980 was R1100,00. The toilet block built about four years ago cost R100 000.

With the gardens in place, attention switched to the laying out of graded paths in the reserve itself. It was the start of a close working relationship between the Hermanus Botanical Society, municipal management and the Fernkloof Advisory Board

The late Dr Ion Williams, well-known botanist and Freeman of Hermanus, was responsible for the layout of the paths and much of the work, utilising his skills as a civil engineer.

In 1971 the reserve was increased by Council from 100 to 1440 hectares. The gardens were allowed to lapse into jungle status while all energies were directed to laying out more trails and keeping the infestation of alien vegetation in check.





In addition to the Botanical Centre, built by the Hermanus Botanical Society, a small Visitors' Centre was built further up the road where the present one now stands. A display of flowers is renewed weekly by a special picking team. On top of Galpinkop, all of 596m high, an overnight hut snuggles against the summit, also built and maintained by the society.

The herbarium has been given international status and houses 1600 montane and coastal species, more than in the entire United Kingdom. The nursery has expanded into a thriving business also run by the society.

At present the reserve encompasses nearly 2 000 hectares with its boundaries including the Mossel River and most of the Cliff Path. It enfolds the town of Hermanus in an ecofriendly embrace.

More than forty rare and endangered species abound on the mountains and coast. Botanists the world over come to visit the giant carnivore *Roridula gorgonias* which grows in pink-flowered profusion on the banks of a high-flowing stream. Its purple-red sticky leaves colour its habitat.

Creamy *Cyrtanthus leucanthus* flowers along the lower Klipspringer trail together with the rare ground protea, *Protea angustata*, camouflaged a soft apple green. Half a healthy stand of the latter was left hanging over a new roadside cliff when bulldozers moved in to make a new road, but it is recovering.

Brachysiphon rupestris hangs from a rocky crevice on Hoy's Koppie, also part of the reserve. Another bright pink bloom is the graceful Cliff Lily, *Gladiolus carmineus*, found only in this area.





Also endemic to Fernkloof is the sticky red and white tubular erica called the Pride of Hermanus, *Erica aristata*

It grows high on Galpinkop, together with another special species, the yellow *Erica galpinii*. The list goes on and on.

Although management of this big area is an ongoing problem at present, the story of the abandoned gardens has had a happy ending (or beginning). Four years ago, with the advent of an aloe garden, then a fragrance garden, a combined Wildflower Festival project of wheelchair friendly paths and restored gardens went into top gear.

Land leased by the society was extended to cover the garden area.

While the paths went into construction, quantities of senescent bush and kikuyu grass were hacked away. An irrigation system was installed, a garden service employed to cut the lawns, and a dedicated garden team of volunteers established erica, protea, bulb and healing plant gardens in quick succession.

In the process dry stone walls of Harry Wood's vintage, ponds and old paths have been uncovered. His trees are now 20m high in some cases and his Indian bauhinia is still flourishing. Rest well, Harry, your garden is again in loving hands.

Geraldine Gardiner

Photographs: Christine Wakfer

