



A South African Perspective

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I have been asked for some info on SA gardening. Here is a start.

As far as I can see from gardening mags, TV etc. SA gardening is much the same as anywhere else. There seems to be this misconception that all of Africa is either a desert or a jungle, with wild animals roaming the streets. Not so. In South Africa we have well developed metropolitan areas, with supporting infrastructure. I need to drive about 300 kilometers to the nearest game reserve to view wild animals. You may have seen TV shots of the Soccer World Cup 2010, the largest worldwide sporting event that we have just hosted.

In and around my area (Johannesburg/Pretoria) we have millions of people living in much the same conditions as anywhere else. We have large, beautiful houses with gardens to match, and then we have the "middle class" homes with smaller gardens. Obviously also the poorer communities with no gardens, and many "informal developments" sprouting up all over. So it's a mixture. The upper and middle class gardens are well-kept and there is a strong Garden Centre industry supplying plants, seed, seedlings and hardware countrywide.

Johannesburg is on the "highveld" of SA, with summer rainfall (October to April). First frost about the 12th of May, last frost about 12th August. So our serious planting season for summer plants has just started. Temperature drops to about minus 5 Celsius on cold nights in winter, and summer temps reach 30 to 35 degrees Celsius (ave. about 25 - 27), with summer nights between 10 and 15 degrees. I must add that these are my own observations and not "official" dates and temperatures.

Obviously we have also been affected by the worldwide economic problems. The garden industry reached a peak a couple of years ago, and since then it's been a battle to survive. Many garden centers have closed down or downsized over the last five years. In our area we have seen an improvement in sales over the last couple of months, and perhaps the end of the recession is in sight. The effect of a tighter budget has been that customers are much more selective and are looking for good value for money. The trend is also towards smaller gardens, or smaller areas within a bigger garden being planted and maintained.

We have noticed the following trends in gardening:

- Smaller gardens / less money available for big gardens.
- Labour becoming expensive and less knowledgeable.
- Owners want gardens but do not want to be gardeners.
- People want "instant solutions" to gardening problems.

- More plant sales by chain stores/large stores but less service (advice) available.
- "Old generation" gardeners retiring, no "young generation" gardeners interested in getting their hands dirty (but they want beautiful gardens).
- Quality of gardening tools declining (not durable).
- Increase in School and Community food gardening projects.

But the major trends are:

Going Green (Eco-friendly)

Home vegetable gardening, cooking, eating. (Our sale of veggie and herb seed and seedlings have increased steeply)

There is a big need and demand for training and support in these areas, but not enough is being offered. The Government is allocating land for these projects without follow-up advice and support. We have tried supporting some of these projects with mixed results.

The biggest veggie sellers are tomatoes, lettuce, cabbage, cauliflower, chillies, green peppers, onions, spinach (swiss chard), egg plants (brinjals), celery, beans, radishes, cucumber, pumpkin and squashes, carrots, and all kinds of herbs.

At our garden centre we grow most of our own plants from seed or cuttings, sourcing the balance from plant growers and wholesalers mostly situated in the frost-free areas to the north of Johannesburg.

South Africa is a very interesting place to live at the moment, with lots of challenges and opportunities in the "Rainbow Nation". The gardening industry is no exception, and the challenge is to keep up with a fast-changing customer base, and the requirements of a younger generation "eco-friendly" gardeners that want to have and enjoy gardens without too much work or knowledge of gardening.

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