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The cutting garden

Jenny Simpson visits a cutting garden in Elgin where fragrant herbs, long-stemmed flowers and roses abound

Pics: Jenny Simpson

The entrance to the two-year-old Heaven Scent cutting garden in Elgin.

Garden owner, Linda Keevy.

Which would you rather have – an armful of scented, freshly picked garden flowers or ordinary greenhouse grown specimens? Linda Keevy, with her easy laugh and gentle way, is not averse to taking on unusual challenges – she and her husband were the first fruit farmers in South Africa to invite the public into their orchards to pick their own cherries. This time she is one of the first to revive the concept of a cutting garden in this country. Husband Corrie runs the fruit farm they bought 21 years back.

"I have always enjoyed gardening but there was never enough time, what with lift clubs and caring for four children," says Linda. "Doing school chapel and boarding house flowers, I always needed to know which blooms would last a week in water. And that's how it started." Her interest piqued, Linda started making tussie mussies from her garden flowers to give to friends on their birthdays. The tussie mussies grew more frequent and later changed into posies.

Two years ago, the Keevys recognised the need to diversify. Out came some apple trees and in went the cutting flowers.

This was the birth of 'The Heaven Scent Garden' in Elgin in the Western Cape. From making posies for friends, to supplying the local farm stall, Linda's little business grew and grew. "We have taken out 12 rows of apple trees so far and I keep needing more and more space! It's a wonderful environmentin which to work and there is so much to learn!"

The sandy soil of the old apple orchard is ideal for most herbs, lavenders, artemisias, scabious, bulbinellas, scented geraniums, mints, alstroemerias, salvias and a host of unusual eryngiums.

This sandy soil is enriched with home-made, purely organic compost and only organic fertilisers are used. All the beds and paths are mulched with a thick layer of chopped up apple trees, smothering any germinating weed seed.

Entering the cutting garden under an archway festooned with myrrh-like perfumed 'Constance Spry' roses, a host of butterflies rise in a cloud above a bed of scented herbs; lemon verbena, variegated applemint, white-flowered creeping thyme and lavenders with unexpected names such as 'Kew Red' and 'Pippa's White'. Ahead, a fanfare of flowers: a veritable jewel box of colours. It is patently obvious that Linda is a lover of abundant and rich colours. She picks a long stemmed beauty, saying "this is rose 'Cora Marie'"; obviously a favourite, with petals of the richest red and an enchanting subtle fragrance.

Rows and rows of rich intense colours, on closer inspection, reveal long spikes of brilliant orange *Watsonia angusta* bordered by fleshy-leafed tangerine and lemon-yellow *Bulbine frutescens*. Waves of scabious sway in the breeze in a blur of purple, mauve and blue, driving the butterflies dilly.

Every now and then, a group of rose bushes erupts above the swathes of perennials, their perfume heavy on the air. There are groups of striking burnt bronze 'King David'; golden-yellow 'Johannesburg Sun'; orange buds of 'Monica'; bridal pink 'Sylvia', she of the long stems and perfect buds; glowing pink 'Eliza'

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and creamy 'Antique Silk', always happy to play a quieter role.

Roses are cut so that they have long stems, and the flowers on the tall-growing bushes are cut so as to keep the bushes manageable. "Of course, the more you cut, the more they bloom," says Linda. She practises 'finger pruning' (taking off a third of the buds) at the beginning of the season – this results in roses throughout the season.

This is also a garden for the avid plant collector; tucked away in corners are exciting rarities such as hyssop – a bushy shrub with aromatic leaves and blue flowers, *Liatris spicata* – a clump-forming perennial with spiky, purple flower heads, *Penstemon digitalis* 'Huskers Red' – burgundy leaves and stems decorated with white foxglove-like flowers; *Primula vialii* – with its conical spikes of tubular, bluish-purple and red flowers and perennial *Potentilla nepalensis* 'Miss Willmott' – carrying its warm cherry-red-centred pink flowers throughout summer.

Under the shade of towering pine trees, the cool packing shed is filled with the heady aromas of fennel fronds, lavender, peppermint, applemint, lemon balm, scented geraniums, roses and lilies packed into water-filled buckets. It is here that bunches are created. As bunches are made, attention is paid to colour combinations. The posies are started with a rose or alstroemeria in the centre followed by greenery and then the rest of the arrangement.

Linda is a great fan of Sarah Raven, English garden writer and presenter of BBC2's Gardener's World programme and writer of *The Cutting Garden* (1996). She feels Sarah has had tremendous influence on her style and choice of plants. And the future? Linda's head is filled with plans: increasing her knowledge of indigenous flowers for the vase, growing lots of lavenders and, best of all, teaching people how to grow their own fruit and berries in their gardens.

A view across a field of tall-growing 'King David' roses and *Verbena bonariensis*.

Fact file

The Heaven Scent Garden, Elgin, Western Cape
Garden owners: Linda and Corrie Keevy
Landscaping: Linda and Corrie Keevy
Age of garden: 2 years old
Contact: The garden is open to the public one weekend a month. Cut flowers from the garden are available to order online with delivery, provided you are in the Cape Metropole, on www.thespade.co.za, or on 021-849-8532, cell: 082-412-9352.

RIGHT: *Primula vialii.*
FAR RIGHT: *Libertia ixioides.*
RIGHT BELOW: Armeria.

Cut flower care

Linda's shares her tips for increasing the life of your cut flowers:

- Mix 10ml sugar, 5ml vinegar and 5ml bleach in 2 litres of vase water.
- Change the water often.
- Keep the vase topped up, especially in hot weather.

A posy made up of flowers from the cutting garden.