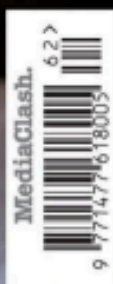


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# Bath Life



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The Newt in Somerset heads to the Chelsea Flower Show

# The STORY of the GREEN DIAMOND

The Newt in Somerset heads to the Chelsea Flower Show bringing with it a touch of South Africa

By Nick Woodhouse



South African succulents are often referred to as 'green diamonds'

**I**n a first for the RHS Chelsea Flower Show, The Newt in Somerset will bring a genuine South African succulent garden to the heart of the capital. The installation will recreate the landscapes of The Karoo, a vast semi-desert stretching across four provinces of Africa's most southern country. Deriving its name from the Khoisan term for 'land of thirst', the region is famed for its low rainfall, cloudless skies and extremes of hot and cold. An almost impenetrable barrier to early explorers and travellers trying to make their way north from Cape Town to the fertile lands of the Highveld, the region is home to the few plants that can survive those extremes; namely succulents and low scrub bushes.

Over the years, these resilient succulents have adapted to thrive on varying rock types in the Karoo, making them an appealing choice for urban gardeners, drawn to their ease of maintenance and benefits to air quality. Sadly, this has gone hand in hand with a flourishing black-market trade in these water-wise South African succulents, often referred to as 'green diamonds'. Botanical gardens around the world are struggling to counter this decline, unable to conserve the rarest and most threatened species due to a lack of space.

The Chelsea show garden aims therefore to highlight the beauty and spirit of these indigenous plants, recreating one of the world's most remarkable, endangered ecosystems. It will feature rare specimens from 15 plant families, including the flora of Namaqualand to the country's south-west, and the thicket vegetation of the Cape to the south-east. Visitors will experience a 'quiver tree forest' on a shale hill, and shimmering quartz fields dotted with small, gem-like succulents.

The show garden's designer and in-house estate architect at The Newt, Katie Lewis, hopes that the space will help us greater

understand these tenacious plants at a time when they – and the region's long-established microclimates – are under a further threat; that of ongoing climate change. The garden will comprise six key areas, with a rich colour palette of earthy reds and browns, reminiscent of those of the Karoo. Aimed at guests of all ages, the installation will incorporate playful, multi-sensory components, bringing nature to life through interactive viewing portals and a dolerite 'rock piano'. "Trying to capture the essence of different succulent landscapes and condensing them into one composition had its challenges," concedes Kate. "We built both scale models and full-scale samples to help our thinking evolve."

*"These resilient succulents have adapted to thrive on varying rock types"*

Mountains, this historic fruit and wine farm dates back to 1692, but is best known these days for its magnificent formal gardens. Greatly impressed by the work of Patrice Taravella at Prieuré Notre Dame d'Orsan in France, owner Karen Roos commissioned the French architect to design the gardens at Babylonstoren in 2007. The resulting space boasts over 900 varieties of edible and medicinal plants including stone and pome fruits, nuts, citrus, berries and herbs, all harvested throughout the year for use in Babylonstoren's two farm-to-fork restaurants.

Along the garden's edge, a natural stream flows to the Berg River. Here, indigenous wild olives flourish; in their shade a collection of some 7,000 clivia lilies explode in a spectacular display every spring. A little further along the waterway sits the Succulent House. The open sides of the long, rough-hewn wooden structure allow the desert breezes to pass through the space, one lined with clay planters of every shape and size;

To help her achieve this bold vision, Kate worked closely with Cornell Beukes and Ernst van Jaarsveld, Master Botanists at Babylonstoren, The Newt's sister estate in South Africa. Set against the backdrop of the Simonsberg

home to an immense collection of around 3,500 plants.

Ernst van Jaarsveld joined Babylonstoren on his retirement in 2015, having spent over four decades at Cape Town's Kirstenbosch Botanical Garden, where he planted and curated the Botanical Society Conservatory. He hopes that the Chelsea Flower Show garden will not only highlight the country's vast diversity of succulents but will also inspire visitors to combine rocks and plants to create something beautiful in their own homes and gardens. "It all starts with stone, since stone begets soil," says Ernst. "The better your soil, the better you eat. Most of the smaller succulents are easy to grow at home. One can propagate them by either seed or cuttings."

Ernst was joined at Babylonstoren by assistant horticulturist Cornell Beukes in 2022. The two share a deep love for the natural world and regularly go on veld expeditions to collect rare plant and rock material. "There are few things that give me greater joy," says Cornell, "than seeing Ernst's excitement when we finally find the plant that we scaled mountains for. To be a part of this journey with him, to share in the enthusiasm and laughter in the middle of nowhere, it's an incredibly special feeling".

Throughout RHS Chelsea Flower Show, which runs 20 – 24 May, the garden team at The Newt will be joined by nine of their colleagues from Babylonstoren, looking to share their knowledge and experience with the event's anticipated 168,000 visitors. And after the show, the garden will have a new life here in Somerset, relocating to The Newt as a permanent display, with the aim to continue raising awareness of waterwise plants and endangered species. ■

For more: [www.thenewtin-somerset.com](http://www.thenewtin-somerset.com)



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Katie Lewis the Newt in Somerset's house estate architect who helped design the project; the show garden aims to highlight the beauty and spirit of succulents; the RHS Chelsea Flower Show installation will recreate the landscapes of The Karoo; Dr Ernst van Jaarsveld and Cornell Beukes, the master botanists at Babylonstoren, The Newt's South African sister estate; views from the Succulent House in Babylonstoren

