

PLANTERS OF THE HOME

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WITH HER SMALL ROUND glasses and sensible skirt, Vatiswa Dunjana looks as if she'd be more at home in a library than standing in a raised bed of vegetables with a garden fork, methodically turning over squares of soil. An earthworm wriggles out and she picks it up, then holds it in her palm.

A field worker and urban agriculturist, Vatiswa is surrounded by trainees at the Nyanga People's Garden Centre. There's a smart young lady in red from KZN, a Mr Cool in dungarees, a gentleman wearing a hat and jacket, a couple of foreign volunteers, and several older women. One of the last recoils from the wriggling worm. "Hai!" she exclaims, and hides behind a friend. Everyone laughs. Just because your origins are in the rural Eastern Cape, it doesn't mean you know about working the land.

Vatiswa is explaining how worms aerate the soil and why pesticides are not a good thing. The trainees – some from NGOs and projects, others aspiring home gardeners – are focused. They take turns to dig, getting a feel for the earth and preparing it properly before planting. They'll learn a lot more on this four-day course about composting, trench bedding, crop

rotation, companion planting, organics and gardening with tyres, cardboard and whatever you have to hand. This afternoon they'll be learning about evaluating, costing and the importance of recording everything, but first they'll be breaking for lunch.

Mabel Bokolo, a field support worker at the centre, is busy cooking up a big pot of vegetables, stirring in great handfuls of spinach and slicing chunks of bread. She also runs the centre's nursery, tending to rows and rows of seedlings protected under shade cloth as well as wrapping them in newspaper for sale. Earlier we found her deep in conversation with a customer, sharing concerns about his poor crop of onions.

□ Patrolling a community garden in Phillipi is Shaba Esiteng (77) a single mother of five. Shaba worked as a domestic for most of her life but says, "If I'd had the garden when I was young I wouldn't have gone to work, I'd have raised vegetables here."

A food-growing initiative is putting the soul of the country into Cape Town's townships.

It might not be a riot of colour with rows of potted petunias, begonias, rose bushes and lavender, but the Nyanga People's Garden Centre is a busy place to which home gardeners come for training, to get starter kits of seedlings and manure, and >>



- Masincendane gardeners sorting the produce.
- Katharina Schneider handing a Harvest of Hope crate over to subscriber Undine Whande.
- Packing freshly picked Harvest of Hope crops.
- Nokwanele Mtsotso is one of a small group from a nearby women's shelter to whom Abalimi give work.



>> to receive support and advice. This, and another centre in Khayelitsha, are the hubs for the work of Abalimi Bezekhaya Home Garden Movement.

Abalimi Bezekhaya, which roughly means 'planters of the home', was started in 1982 and has been growing in every sense since then. From the simple idea of helping people start vegetable gardens to feed themselves and their families, it has expanded and morphed into a deep-rooted, multi-faceted movement that's spread across five of Cape Town's major townships like a vibrant green stain. As well as individual and community gardens it includes street greening, schools work and a peace park. But its most recent developments have been the creation of the umbrella Farm and Garden National Trust – the objectives of which are to eradicate poverty, foster employment, improve physical and social health and protect the environment – and the flourishing Harvest of Hope project, through which produce grown by the gardeners is supplied to subscribers.

At the Harvest of Hope packing depot, Rob Small, co-architect and co-director of Abalimi, hands each of our group of interested parties a brilliant orange carrot to nibble on while taking us on a tour. He's timed it just right so we can see the crates of produce being packed and then loaded into bakkies which will deliver them to the pick-up points around Cape Town – where subscribers to the project collect them. The produce is all organic and looks fabulously fresh.

"Well it is!" declares Lisiwe Stofile, a mother of two from Macassar, who's busy sliding baby tomatoes into brown paper bags. And Lisiwe would know, as she's one of the 50 farmers from the 20-odd community gardens that supply the produce. At present they're filling about 160 Harvest of Hope boxes a week, "but by 2012," says Christina Kaba, one of the three Farm and Garden Trustees, "we hope to be selling around 600 boxes and have 200 micro-farmers."

Rob Small is busy explaining the logistics of gardening and micro-farming. "There's a survival level where the individual grows enough to feed his or her family on a patch of land the size of a door. Then there's the subsistence level where the person grows enough to have extra to sell or give away. Semi-commercial is where you grow enough to make a living from it and still have an abundance for yourself. A 500m² piece of land can bring in R1 500, or twice that if it's efficiently worked. It's good economics but, more importantly, it makes social sense."

Warming to the subject, about which he's passionate, Rob continues, "Large-scale enterprise has effectively wiped out the small farmer – that



and a global culture of instant consumerism where everybody wants to be rich enough to buy whatever food they want, where and when they want it, but not work hard on the land to produce it. They'd rather pay to go to the gym."

Rob takes us to the Fezeka Community Centre in Phillipi to meet the Masincendane ('we do it together') gardeners: five women, all over 70 years old, who work a 5 000m² piece of land. It's still early but four of the women are sitting peacefully next to a wheelbarrow, sorting and neatly bundling beets, carrots, spinach, spring onions and leeks for collection. The fifth member of the group is walking along the furrows of produce, bucket in hand, picking snails off the young leaves. If it weren't for the towering electricity pylons overhead, rows of shacks all around and the sound of police sirens in the distance, we could be in the heart of rural South Africa.

Rob is especially proud of the Masincendane team, the oldest member of whom is Gladys Phuza (86). "Our gardens are largely managed and worked by women, at least 60% of whom are mothers and grandmothers," he says. "It's only unemployment that gets younger people and men here."

Phillipina Ndamane has been part of the team for 10 years. Like Gladys, she loves everything about it: the companionship, the income, the produce. "Sometimes if I give the little ones 10 cents, they will help me carry the manure. But everyone ... everyone ... likes to eat the vegetables – especially on Sundays when I cook a whole lot." □

**Map reference F&G2
see inside back cover**



THE ABALIMI START-UP GARDEN

You need: a piece of land measuring at least 1m² (the size of a door), seedlings, a garden fork, a trowel, water and time.

You dig: the soil over thoroughly to prepare it for planting. If the soil is poor, first feed it with manure or compost. With the soil prepared, plant the seedlings a hand's breadth apart, then water regularly.

You get: to experience the miracle of natural abundance.

□ Mabel Bokolo and Rob Small celebrating the power of the growth.

□ Field worker Vatiswa Dunjana passing on knowledge to an intake of trainees.

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