

February 13

This morning I thought we would talk about old ways and new ways, what was and what is, what works, what doesn't, necessity or myth and maybe a few non-essentials in the garden.

Training as a horticulturist took many years both in formal education and out there with the practical which in the end is what it is all about.

Both layman, formally trained horticulturists and specialists in their fields will all give you a different answer to the same question and in many cases they all work.

So, this tells us that gardening practice is not an exact science, maybe a mix between science, a bit of art and a lot of common sense!!

Lets start with the many practices that have been handed down from previous generations. We all probably picked up the interest in gardening from our parents or others who dragged us along to help dig holes, push wheelbarrows and shovel....you know what.

Like everything else gardening practice has changed over the years.

It costs more, we have smaller gardens and don't generally depend on them for food, we also have less time to garden due to the demands of those we work for.

With less time we need to be more innovative and find better ways of doing things... or not doing them at all!!

The most dynamic change is still in progress... and that is we have suddenly realized that gardening is moving from a pastime to a more inclusive environmental exercise.

The whole gardening scene has got a lot bigger if we include all the other living things that share our gardens.

At the same time it has become a lot less complicated.

Anyone can garden, you don't need to be green fingered or have any special training.

Of course we learn from others, through informal training, talks, garden clubs, related organizations, and believe me they sometimes have different ideas.

Variety is a good garden word so lets get into it...

I think soil treatment is probably number 1.

I remember spending many backbreaking hours turning over a vegetable garden to earn my 'Bob a Job' as a boy scout.

Many years later after a truckload of education and in the real world I was telling everybody. Don't dig! Or more specifically don't turn the soil.

Why, you might ask! There are so many reasons, but here are a few.

Soil is naturally aerated with water penetration and the workings of micro organisms and other living creatures like earthworms.

By turning the soil you are exposing all of this underground life to the sun, so they frizzle up and at the same time, the soil dries out rapidly.

That includes soil bacteria, fungi, organic matter, insects

The result is, your soil becomes depleted and poorer with some scientists saying there is more life in a spoon of soil, than there are people on earth.

Viruses, probably a dirty word for some, also play a huge and vitally important role in soil health as they do in our lives.

If you want numbers, take 10 to the power of 9....my calculator doesn't go that far...and that is the amount of viruses in a gram of soil.

Which basically tells us we can't live without them.

Another result of disturbed soil is that it encourages weed growth as the dormant seeds are exposed to light.

The solution is to cover the soil with organic material, like compost and mulch which will decompose and move down into the soil without your help.

That's why we don't find weeds in natural undisturbed areas.

There is a belief held by many that all indigenous plants are waterwise.

Sure, most of our local fynbos is classified as waterwise but no matter what they still need a certain amount of moisture to survive.

What about all those drought hardy succulents we believe can survive without water, they can't, and still need minimal water to survive and remain healthy.

Actually, there are many succulents, that naturally grow in moist shady conditions and don't survive in full sun with little water.

Another misconception we have, is that our plants need a constant supply of fertilizer to thrive. This is not so! If they cannot grow well in the natural local soil, then we are using the wrong plants.

Compost and mulch serve the purpose and assist towards a more sustainable situation.

All fertilizer is more of a treat than a necessity but keep in mind that organic fertilizers are more beneficial to soils and less harmful all round.

I just want to end off with a very interesting tree suggestion for small to medium gardens.

Noltea africana or Soap bush is a widespread local which is perfect because of its size and flowers.

The bunches of little flowers, which appear from winter right into spring, start off purple and open white with a sweet fragrance.

Granted, it's not always easy to find but don't give up as the reward is worth it. Enjoy the beach...Goodbye until next week