The more you have to do with plants the more you understand and love them. The issue is not how big, scented or colourful their flowers or whether they fit into our design because in the end they should all have a purpose. What does matter is our understanding of how they fit into the environment; what role they play in the big picture and their relationship with other living things.

I don’t believe there is such a thing as a bad plant no matter how it affects us but sadly we do tend to blame them for many of our woe’s. What we should rather be doing is managing our environment responsibly and that obviously includes what goes on in our gardens. We cannot continue to use plants we know nothing about, just because they are pretty and colourful or because someone has recommended them and doesn’t even know the name.

That well known expression invasive alien is always a headline as we try and re-establish the perfect environment, which shows that we have failed to act responsibly in the past and are now paying the price.

All living things eventually adapt to their surroundings, some thrive and some just hang in there.

Let not terminology create a bias against certain plants. For some the word exotic, conjures up pictures of plants that are not suitable to our environment...this can be true if they have invasive tendencies or don’t play a productive role.

Most food on our table is exotic and originated in far off places. So let’s not paint all plants with the same brush.

Traditionally our gardens are filled with exotic plants mainly due to their ornamental value but we are learning slowly that this characteristic alone does not contribute much except to ourselves!!

Take the ever colourful Bougainvillea, the flowers are sterile and it does not produce seed unless someone has an original species in the garden which I doubt.

Although ornamental they do provide a safe habitat for many birds and probably other creatures so they are not entirely useless ornaments.

Our prized Plumbago which is used as both a creeper and shrubby hedge plant can be planted alongside Bougainvillea as both are tough and enjoy minimal water and care.

It is quite a sight to see them intertwined and both in flower.
Have you noticed anything unusual out in the wild or for that matter in your garden? Maybe we can learn a lot more about future climatic conditions if we start paying a bit more attention to the changing habits of plants. Something else we can think more of, is making our gardens a lot more functional for wildlife by having the perfect habitat with a diverse population of plants, insects, reptiles and amphibians. A combination of plants that give shelter, fruit, seed and nectar will not only attract birdlife but all the insects that go with them. Take for example the Wild Peach – Kiggelaria africana. It’s a perfect evergreen that naturally occurs locally and in many other vegetation types but importantly it sustains the livelihood of many creatures. Firstly it attracts the Garden Acraea butterfly which lays its eggs on the leaves. Both the butterfly and eggs are a tasty reward for many and when the larvae hatch they virtually strip the tree for nourishment but in the process are predated on by wasps, other insects and certain birds. Whatever you do, don’t go out there and start spraying them with poison because they don’t kill the tree and secondly you will be killing off a host of other beneficial insects that are vital to your gardens health. The seeds are relished by many birds as well, so all in all, this tree like most other plants plays a very special role in your garden and is not just a pretty face.

Weather extremes are becoming more common there is much you can do to ameliorate the effects in your garden, by just doing or for that matter not doing a few things that might make it worse. Over watering and over fertilizing are two good examples that weaken plants this time of the year when they should be extra strong to cope with extreme heat. Mulching creates a blanket that keeps the soil cool in summer and warm in winter. The more you dig and disturb the soil, the more heat it dries out and healthy micro-organism activity is destroyed, so try not to dig unless necessary. My plant of the week and possibly the plant of the year are without doubt the Lobelias. The veld and fynbos can be dry and hibernating but you are sure to see a little and sometime insignificant Lobelia smiling up at you. See you next week.