

February 22,2020

I suppose we all get asked the question...What plants really do it for us?

It could be in the wild or in a garden but no matter where, we seem to have a special relationship with them. Why? Its hard to define, maybe its strong childhood memories, maybe its something we experienced in the wild, maybe its just that they bring out our animal instincts because they are a wild species. Many trees do it for me but one group just brings it out for me...The thorn trees... but particularly the Sweet thorn- *Acacia karoo* now correctly called *Vachellia karoo*.

I live amongst them in the Karoo and they are a never ending source of wonderment and entertainment for me. I am at home with them no matter where they are in South Africa as they are widespread and common.

In very dry areas we find them along water courses but are also scattered in areas where the rainfall is a bit higher.

They are not crazy about acid soils and winter rain but they do occur naturally in the western Cape.

They have a huge history with humans dating back many hundreds of years. Medicinal, leather tanning, rope making, firewood, gum used in confectionary, stock fodder, needle work and honey production.

Which leads me onto their association with animals and insects.

The flowers are rich in pollen attracting bees and birds.

Many butterfly species and their caterpillars are dependent on this tree and up in the bushveld the cute little bush babies feed on insect and gum.

It's the perfect tree for nesting and attracting general birdlife.

Be patient and you will see in one sitting....*Acacia* Pied Barbet, Fairy and Fiscal Fly catchers, weavers, Karoo Prinia, Mousebirds, lets not forget all the doves, white eyes, Bulbuls and mossies.

Because of the bird activity there are many other plant species that germinate underneath it so you will always find a nice copse of different tree and shrub species. So, who can't love this tree??

By the way it lives for 30-50 yrs so you can give it a hug most days.

The other plant that really does it for me is *Cotyledon orbiculata*, commonly known as Pigs Ear or Plakkies.

I know I speak about this plant often but really what would our veld and gardens be without it?

It is an interesting and versatile waterwise specimen, has good contrasting colours for the designer, flowers for many months in summer here in the W, Cape, while in the summer rainfall areas it is more of a winter spring flowerer. It must be the easiest plant to propagate from cuttings. Take a cutting, let the end dry out for a week or so and just pop it into the ground.

Give it some water to settle the soil and then leave it alone until you see growth then give it another dash of water and forget all about it.
It is of course one of the best fillers for hot spots where nothing seems to grow and has great entertainment value!
When it's in flower, observe quietly and watch the sun birds come in for their nectar feast.
The most frequent visitor is the beautiful Malachite Sunbird who will virtually feed right next to you.
If you sit quietly with camera ready, you will get prize winning shots of this bird who visits daily to check the pantry!!
Other visitors are the Double Collared Sunbird, and surprisingly the Cape Weaver seems to get in on the act as well!!
I have also watched a Fairy Flycatcher busy with insects around the flowers.
The Pigs Ear has many interesting forms both in leaves and flowers.
Some forms have finger like leaves, others are more round leaved and some rather elongated and strap like.
Flowers too vary in colour from red to pink and yellow.
It has many medicinal uses the most common is that the juice from the leaves is used to treat corns and warts.
This plant when out in the wild, signifies for me, strength and adaptability under challenging conditions in nature, and I feel at home with it.
Out of many, these are just two plants that mean something special to me but I am sure that there are special plants that you have a meaningful association with.
In your garden you will get to know every plant and develop a connection that you will take with you, no matter where in the world you go.
Well that's it this week...a dose of plant mindfulness
From me Sandy Munro....Goodbye