

THE VELD COMES TO OUR BALCONY

John Martley

These days I can no longer wander at will among plants where they still grow naturally in their own wild ways, nor in places where they can still manage to maintain a semblance of their original society, nor in places where a few humble representatives from the past have found a niche in a new era from which to remind us of their past. I am thinking here of your little Oxalis cornuta which flourished in our lawn in Forfar Street in company with our yellow Ixia, and of our Lobelia and Wahlenbergia species which like your Oxalis survive the frequent passage of the mowing machine over the lawn of our flat in a Capetown suburb.

If I am no longer able to get to the veld why shouldn't it come to me. I learned the trick of it in New Zealand. Just scratch a bit of surface soil from the bush or other propitious situation, bring it home and care for it and one will be surprised at what may come up.

I use rectangular containers (made of asbestos I think) approximately $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet by 8 inches and 8 inches deep giving in all about 7 square feet. I filled them with a light soil mixture on a layer of drainage. I never change the soil. Old plants I no longer want I just cut down leaving the stump. For new plants I dig a small hole and sow a collected seed or two or plant a seedling or rooted cutting "gardening in miniature". To prevent the surface from crusting I used to cover the surface with a layer of woodwool cut up into $\frac{1}{8}$ inch lengths. This is a tip I adapted from the Kirstenbosch Botanic Gardens. When a new area of bush in the grounds is cleared for development all the trees and brush wood is chipped by machinery and a layer of chips several inches thick is strewn all over the newly cleared surface. The ground keeps its moisture well both on slopes and level ground; seeds and established seedlings and cuttings take well. Regeneration from the surroundings and from corms, bulbs, seeds, roots and rhizomes in the ground itself begin at once and the natural background grows up with the specimens of native shrubs and trees that are planted out in the cleared ground to become show specimens.

My boxes of veld have been growing now for six years. All the brush wood I now remove from them I cut up fine ($\frac{1}{8}$ ") and it all goes back into the soil by mulching, and so enriches it. There is also nitrogen enrichment of the soil as there are always a few leguminous plant growing in the boxes producing their nitrogenous modules in the soil.

On a recent count I find I have about 75 species of plants growing in my seven square feet. Most of them flower in their due season and

many set seed. A few shrubs or woody herbs I have persuaded to grow a leg or trunk $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 feet tall with a canopy reaching up to over 4 feet, a number of the smaller shrubs I "browse" with small clippers to form a middle storey while the small herbs and bulbs can fill the spaces in the "forest floor" in between. And when there is no vacant "forest floor" left the scramblers like some of the Helichrysums, Mesembryanthemums and trailing Indigofera spp. and other leguminosae just cascade over the edges. Every now and again I have a visitor from the veld of Table Mountain half a mile away as the crow flies. A small butterfly, one of the Blues like your small one came to suck the honey of an attractive biennial Lobelia but somehow neglected to see that the seeds were fertilized, one of those big mud wasps came for a thorough search of the plants for a caterpillar to stock his mud cell, another time a couple of white eyes very like your one came to steal the honey from a small red flowered legume, Sutherlandia frutescens. One spring our local dove built her nest in one of our boxes up against the window under a small bush with an unobtrusive entrance from the side of the balcony. Fortunately she was wise enough to build her flat nest of sticks higher than the water level so she was never incomodded by my daily waterings. We had an intimate view of their family life; one egg, one chick, 4 weeks to hatch, a fortnight for fledging and then the first flight and back again the 3rd day, for a short time and then their departure. The chick was evidently a male for next season he tried in vain to explain to his mate the advantages of a nest with a good food supply on the doorstep. She evidently wasn't with it and said very clearly "nothing doing". Later they came with their offspring for an occasional meal. He now occupies my balcony as his batchelor territory and defends it against all doves including his parents at meal times. When a big rock pigeon arrives he discretely turns a blind eye and moves to the other end of the balcony. I had better conclude here so as not to exceed your limited space.

7th April, 1973:

EDITORIAL WANDERINGS

DIANELLA NIGRA

Once more following Arnold Wall's footsteps we sought the specimen of Dianella nigra recorded by him on Page 50 of the Botany of Christchurch as growing on the southern side of Cashmere Valley. To our delight we found that not only does that specimen still exist but three substantial clumps of Dianella are now growing in the crevices of the large rock he describes. We also came across the largest patch of Hypoxis hookeri yet seen by us on the Port Hills flourishing some 200 to 300 yards from the Dianella.