

Barry Gould and Alison Green have created an unpretentious country garden, punctuated by unexpected art works. The garden is structured around a series of distinct spaces – a neatly clipped expanse of lawn near the house, a formal rose garden, a pear orchard – linked together by wilder areas of indigenous plantings and winding pathways that encourage discovery.

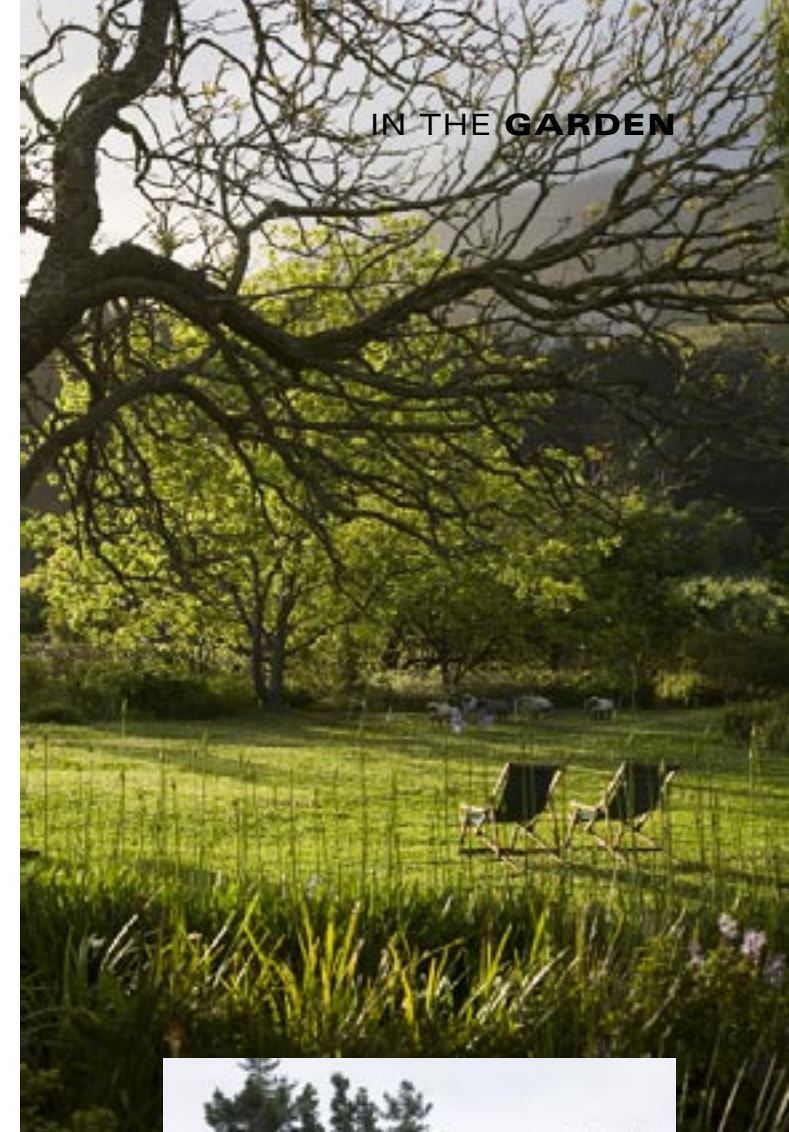
# work of heart

An art-loving couple have created a magical country garden in Elgin, where their children, free-roaming chickens and fantastic contemporary sculptures are equally at home

Text Lianne Burton Production René Slee Photographs David Ross



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IN THE GARDEN



**W**hen engineer Alison Green and architect Barry Gould moved from Johannesburg to Elgin eight years ago to take over Wildekrans Country House from Alison's sister, they both knew more about art than they did about gardening. Avid collectors since their early 20s, they arrived with enough pieces to fill the walls of their country home and their adjacent B&B. 'I love the idea of having art everywhere, not labelled or intellectualised; just there to enhance one's life,' says Alison.

Alison and Barry's shared passion and unpretentious approach has found new expression in the rambling country garden they've created for themselves, daughters Molly and Hannah, and visitors to their guesthouse. Sloping downwards away from the houses and then rising to meet the foothills of the Houw Hoek mountains in the distance, it's a picture-perfect landscape of gently rolling lawns, towering trees, shady ponds and winding paths.

'The magic of this garden is the setting,' says Barry, who has become an avid gardener. 'The structure is big – it has a sweeping effect – and within that there are amazing vistas. The first thing most people do when they arrive is take off their shoes and walk on the cool grass. They love the tranquillity ... and the informality. During the Elgin Open Gardens one guy came in and just lay on his back for hours. I don't think he got to see any other gardens that day.'

When Barry and Alison first arrived at Wildekrans, the garden was more formal than it is today, with manicured lawns, established trees, neatly edged rose beds, a fruit orchard and a pond that had been scooped out from a marshy area along the left of the property. Over the years, they have consciously allowed it to become wilder. 'We're slowly converting areas to indigenous plantings,' says Barry. 'It was originally a traditional country garden with a lot of roses. Now we're restricting the roses to a small rose garden and turning the other rose beds over to restios, natural grasses, proteas, agapanthus and ericas. >

**THIS PAGE, TOP LEFT** The garden becomes less formal further from the house, finally blending into the distant Houw Hoek mountain range. **TOP RIGHT** Established trees provide shade and privacy, and guests are encouraged to sit back and enjoy the garden and the sculptures in it. **ABOVE** A pathway weaves through the rose garden, bordered by a fence made from alien wattle branches. **OPPOSITE** Five of Wilma Cruise's ceramic sheep – originally part of an edition of 30 ('Sheep may safely graze: the return of the Bultfontein sheep') – huddle happily in the shade.



THIS PAGE, TOP LEFT Barry and Alison discovered the Slow Movement in 2001, and delight in long alfresco lunches – with Barry’s own olive oil and wine. TOP RIGHT A pathway, flanked with lavender and indigenous wild irises, leads from the guesthouse onto the lawn. ABOVE Fantasy characters from Elgin-based artist Sheena Ridley’s ‘Abbey Road’ installation dance happily across a bridge over the pond. OPPOSITE Alison created ‘Follow your heart to the mountain’ from whimsical scrap-metal hearts leading from the bottom of the garden into the forest.

We make our own compost, and we don’t really have to spray because there are lots of insects and birds to keep the balance.’

It’s not a garden for purists or control freaks. ‘One visitor was horrified that we allowed the beetles to eat our roses,’ quips Barry. ‘I’m not much of a plants person,’ he explains. ‘I garden for effect, for the environments I can create and for the emotional reaction it gives.’ Tiny oak trees sprout from the acorns that drop from the huge oak near the house, the pond is fringed with giant arum lilies and wild flowers dance in the soft grass at the bottom of the garden.

But there is a definite sense of order in the chaos, a master plan that can be attributed to Barry’s schooled architectural eye. ‘It has structure, and clearly defined spaces. Overall, the idea is for the garden to be a little neater and more formal near the house, and then to get less formal as one walks away from it,’ he says.

And, of course, there are the artworks. Sculptures by the likes of Wilma Cruise, Guy du Toit, Nikki Swanepoel and Sheena Ridley have been placed where they feel most comfortable, rather than for visibility or artifice. Encountering one of them is more like running into an old friend than an honoured guest. ‘We moved SID around for hours before we found the perfect spot for him,’ says Alison, affectionately referring to Wilma Cruise’s imposing sculpture ‘Sacro Iliac Dementia’. ‘A garden is fantastic for art,’ says Barry. ‘When you put a sculpture into a landscape, it’s a human intervention, and then it becomes rooted in that context.’

‘We’ve created a typical country garden that encourages you to explore,’ says Alison. ‘There’s a sense of discovery. The artworks are unexpected surprises along the way ... the punctuation.’ □

**Wildekrans (wildekrans.co.za) is part of the Green Mountain Eco Route (greenmountain.co.za), the Groenlandberg Conservancy and the Kogelberg Biosphere Reserve. The Elgin Open Gardens are on show every year in early November.**

TIPS FOR CREATING A COUNTRY-STYLE GARDEN

**Contextualise the setting.** Look beyond your property’s borders to see if there are any natural features you could incorporate into the visual frame of your own garden – established trees, shrubs or hedges in a neighbour’s garden, or other attractive views.

**Embrace abundance.** A country garden should celebrate the multitudes of plant types, leaf sizes and colours that occur in nature. Try to include herbs, vegetables, deciduous and evergreen trees, fruit trees and climbers too.

**Keep practicalities in mind.** Don’t create miles of flowerbeds that need constant care and water. Choose indigenous plants wherever possible or create a meadow with low-maintenance indigenous grasses and flowers that will also attract an abundance of birds and insects.

**Stick to long, sweeping lines.** In an informal garden, lots of little flowerbeds become fussy and confusing. Create a basic structure in your flowerbeds using evergreen shrubs of various sizes, and then ensure spontaneity and informality by introducing annuals and perennials, grouped in uneven numbers of three or five for good rhythm. **Avoid disjointed areas.** Areas of lawn surrounded by flowerbeds invite the eye into the garden and offer patches of visual calm. Be sure to plan a line running through the space, linking various areas with pathways to create a sense of discovery and flow.

**An expanse of water is soothing and cooling to look at.** It also reflects the sky, creating a sense of body. Consider including a small pond or stream if you have the space.

