

**IN BRIEF**

**Size** Five hectares across various gardened areas on a 25-hectare guest farm in Franschhoek

**Soil type** Clay and rock with impoverished sandy soils, naturally replenished with compost, organic eco pellets and bonemeal

**Climate** Long, hot, dry summers and short, cold, wet winters. Strong prevailing winds throughout the year

**X-factor** Large scale painterly perennial borders, electric colour-curved Mediterranean planting and instated meadow, now wild, self-seeding and home to a host of pollinators

# TRUE COLOURS

Big blousy blooms create architectural drama and lure biodiversity to this Franschhoek garden

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ne would be hard-pressed to know that the gardens at La Cotte Farm in Franschhoek are in their infancy. The grand double borders, lush lawns and



profusion of big, blousy blooms look more like a well-established romantic garden of old than the intoxicating new discovery that it is, completed a little over a year ago, to be precise. La Cotte is the brainchild of landscape and interior designer Dominic Touwen, who has turned his intuitive flair with colour and pattern to the outdoors and created a garden crammed with electric colour and painterly plant combinations that immediately captivate the senses.

For Dominic, creating a garden is like telling a story. 'We all have memories and experiences that gardens evoke,' he says. 'Granny's roses, a cool drink on a hot day with the smell of freshly cut grass, falling asleep on a blanket under the dappled light of trees – I aim to create romantic gardens with atmosphere and mood.' With the architecture of the garden firmly in place, the plants have been allowed to take centre stage. 'It is not about mastery over Nature but rather curating and working with Nature to bring out her best,' he says.

The garden originally comprised of vast areas of overgrown alien vegetation, leaving acres of impoverished soil, largely compacted clay, desperately in need of nourishment. Hundreds of cubic metres of compost and organic conditioners were added and months spent preparing the beds before planting could become a reality. When it comes to site and climate, Dominic's philosophy is that it is futile fighting it. 'In reality, the adjustments one can make are small and we must ultimately work with nature, not against it.' Poor soils aside, the climate at La Cotte is challenging for gardens. With assistance from botanist and garden designer Rowena Smuts, a palette of Mediterranean plants best suited to dry summers and battering winds made for a garden that would stand up to challenging local weather conditions. Planting happened in the cooler autumn and spring months, and beds were layered

with a generous amount of coarse compost and wood chips. New plants were irrigated throughout the first summer. 'No plants are drought-resistant in the first couple of years, whatever anyone might say to the contrary. We water deeply and less often to support their need to establish deep root systems.'

Lavish double borders were planted with an intoxicating mix of fruit trees, flowers, vegetables and wild meadow beginning at the original manor house – now a sublime spot for an evening tippie – and extend to a pretty dovecote at the far end of the garden. A favourite flower is *Salvia canariensis*, for its prolonged flowering and *Salvia leucantha*, a close second, for its three opulent flashes of velvety, purple spires through the year. Salvias were combined with dry garden staples such as Phlomis, sun roses, lavender underplanted with catmint and lamb's ears. Architectural drama enters with clusters of spikey Eryngiums and decorative Aristida, Calamagrostis and miscanthus grasses. Height has been achieved with purple Buddlejas, giant

honey flowers, large panicles of *Sambucus nigra* followed by glossy blackberries and the scalloped leaves and delicate petals of plume poppies. Silver leaves, dark foliage and deep, mulberry and magenta-coloured blooms are evidence of a colourist at play.

All the gardens have been designed with attracting wildlife in mind. Long, tubular flowers of salvias, wild dagga and aloes are perfectly adapted to the thin, curved beaks of sunbirds and hummingbirds. 'We do not spray, so there are plenty of aphids and other insects for ladybirds and insect-eaters to feed. Populations of various 'pest' species were initially high in the garden, which has since become balanced with an increasing number of jackal buzzards, African harrier-hawks and predator birds being spotted on the farm. 'At the outset, the newly planted garden was soundless. Now it is filled with birdsong – and chameleons, a sure sign of a healthy garden,' Dominic says. ■

La Cotte Farm  [lacottefarm.com](https://www.lacottefarm.com)



A TRADITIONALLY STYLED DOVECOTE IS HOME TO RESIDENT CHICKENS AT THE FAR END OF THE LAWNED AVENUE

OPPOSITE PAGE CLIPPED SALT BUSH 'CLOUDS' FRAME THE SECOND-OLDEST MILL IN SOUTH AFRICA



## Flower power

Dominic Touwen talks about the thriving meadows at La Cotte and letting nature take its course.

'Wildflower meadows are not as easy as they look, especially in the Western Cape. To thrive, they require a base layer of non-invasive grasses. Decent indigenous ones are African lovegrass (*Eragrostis curvula*) and *Aristida junciformis*. At La Cotte, we seed other festuca grasses such as chewings fescue and sheep fescue as these varieties allow wildflowers to pop up in between them. We plant a mix of delicate flowers such as Queen Anne's lace (*Daucus carota*),

ox-eye daisies (*Leucanthemum vulgare*), lesser knapweed (*Centaurea nigra*), widow's trefoil and salad burnet. The meadow is irrigated in late spring and left to its own devices in summer. We have a laissez-faire attitude to 'weeds' such as common dandelions and tongblaar because their flowers provide such great food for pollinators. Once all the seeds have set, around mid-summer, the entire meadow is mowed. Then, the cuttings are left to provide green manure and mulch for the cycle to begin again. Interestingly, in Europe and the United Kingdom, cuttings are removed in an attempt to reduce soil fertility – of course, we don't have that problem! [dominictouwen.co.za](http://dominictouwen.co.za)



HISTORY-MEETS  
NATURAL-BEAUTY  
WITH NUANCED  
PLANTINGS  
OF GOLD  
CARPET, CLIPPED  
SALTBUSH AND  
DUNE CROWBERRY



## Plant wisdom

Botanist and garden designer Rowena Smuts shares her passion for colour and building biodiversity in the garden at La Cotte Farm.

The ecological side of colour choice played a pivotal role in our final colour palette at La Cotte Farm. The intoxicating selection of colours available when selecting perennial planting is not only a feast for the human eye, but the colour in the garden is irresistible to pollinators and a great way to lure biodiversity back into the garden. The salmon-hued flowers of *Cotyledon orbiculata* and the fiery *Leonotis leonurus* are magnets for sunbirds and grace us with electric colour in the garden during the winter months. Pelargoniums produce swathes of pinks and deep magenta flowers from November to March and attract bees, bumblebees, carpenter bees and a host of local butterflies. Be aware that perennial planting is seasonal, and planting with a carefully considered backbone of evergreens, clipped spheres, and cloud hedges will visually carry your garden through the off-season.

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TOP ROW, FROM LEFT LAMB'S EARS; *SALVIA LEUCANTHA*; *SALVIA CLEVELANDII*  
MIDDLE ROW, FROM LEFT LOW-GROWING CATMINT; PINK CHINESE FOXGLOVES AND  
*VERBENA BONARIENSIS*; BUTTERY COLOURED NICOTIANA  
LEFT GIANT HONEY FLOWER AND *STIPA GIGANTEA* GRASS