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SPICE WORLD



In the Spice House – a custom-built greenhouse at Babylonstoren Estate, near Cape Town – master gardener Gundula Deutschländer and her team have created a verdant paradise dedicated to showcasing the many charms of spice-bearing plants

BY ROBYN ALEXANDER



It's just after 8am at Babylonstoren, a destination wine and guest farm with a relatively new but already world-renowned garden. The estate is a short drive from central Cape Town, and there's bustle and activity everywhere this morning – as there always is on a working farm. Right now, it's autumn and the first of the bountiful harvest of pumpkins is being picked and processed, destined for use in Babylonstoren's restaurants and via its farm shop, both in situ and online. However, inside one of the garden team's latest projects – the Spice House – all is calm and quiet. As we await master gardener Gundula Deutschländer, there is time to take in the details of the greenhouse itself: classic cast metal doors; opaque glass panels; a large slab of stone fashioned into a striking table with a central water runnel and edged with wooden benches; and a slatted wooden floor raised above a pool of

water populated with fish that regularly swim up into the two glass tanks placed at either end of the wooden deck. It's pleasantly warm and humid, and the air is redolent with the subtle scents of humus-filled soil and the variety of lush tropical plants that fill the space. Into this beautiful, tranquil space comes Gundula, who – rather like the contents of the greenhouse – glows with a gentle yet resilient energy. She is the epitome of the softly spoken gardener who exudes subtle strength. 'It's quite remarkable this morning that we don't have the misters on, but I think it's because you're here,' she smiles. 'When I came here yesterday, you couldn't see more than a metre in front of you.' Having worked at Babylonstoren for 15 years as the farm's master gardener, Gundula has played a part in all of the estate's innovative gardening efforts, and the Spice House is the latest of these. She explains that the project originated from the idea of creating a space on the farm

← Meeting Place

The Spice House includes a custom-designed natural stone table – complete with a central channel through which water can be run – and wooden benches at which visitors can comfortably gather for one of Gundula's demonstrations of how to brew fresh plant and spice infusions, or for a bespoke event.

← More Than a Tour

The space has been carefully designed – with a slatted wooden floor over a pond of water, book-ended on each side with glass aquarium cases – and planted so that a visit here is much more than just a garden tour. Gundula and the garden team are always aiming, she says, to work out how 'this experience of being in this lovely space can also be brought to your own table at your home. And still carry a little bit of this wonderment...'

that served as a reminder of the Cape of Good Hope's history as a place through which so many precious spices once passed from east to west. It's a way of paying tribute to the spices themselves, too; and to those who had 'an obsession with everything exotic, from sugar to paper', as Gundula puts it. As the Western Cape has a dry, Mediterranean-style climate, doing this necessitated building a greenhouse for the spice plants, which are almost invariably subtropical or tropical in origin – and so, require those same conditions to be replicated for them in order to thrive.

What's more, most of these plants, which range from black pepper to galangal, tamarind and cardamom, are far from easy to come by in South Africa. Gundula says some were found via connections at botanical gardens in Durban and other subtropical parts of the country, adding that her fellow Babylonstoren botanist, Ernst van Jaarsveld, was a great help in this regard. International suppliers had to be tapped, and a special journey to Zanzibar to source plants was undertaken too.

In other words, like every beautiful garden, the Spice House has taken considerable effort – and quite a lot of time – to create. And as Gundula relates, it has taught those who tend it all kinds

← **Bottom Left**

'One plant I gave to the garden is my butterfly pea (*Clitoria ternatea*),' says Gundula, 'which makes a beautiful, intensely blue infusion.' It's native to equatorial Asia, and Gundula explains that she had long wanted to source some seeds or cuttings of the plant to install in the Spice House, in part because Babylonstoren's theme colour is blue. A Chinese visitor to the garden approached Gundula, saying 'I see you've got lovely plants here, and I'd like to give you these seeds', at which point she took five butterfly pea seeds out of her bag and gave them to the master gardener. 'It was like a fairy tale!' As the flowers dry, they are picked to make this 'lightly flavoured' blue infusion, which she brews for guests on special occasions. Bolstering its visual appeal even further, adding a few drops of lemon juice to the infusion turns it a soft pinky mauve colour, all of which makes for a captivating experience.

Right →

The Babylonstoren gardeners 'are able, as our work, to share in such different ways. Not only visually, but also through giving people an experience that they can make their own – like creating a spiced infusion from freshly picked plants for somebody and sharing that', explains Gundula. Here, she crushes fresh rhizomes such as ginger and turmeric, then adds fragrant edible leaves and dried spices, to create a unique, fresh infusion. Turmeric is one of her favourites, says Gundula, at least in part because of its vibrant yellow colour. 'It's just like sunshine, but it comes from the ground,' she says.



Golden Jewels

Gundula unearths turmeric (*Curcuma longa*) rhizomes. 'I'm fascinated with root crops because it's really like mining for jewels,' she says. 'You only lift them to harvest when the plants are dormant, so everything growing above the soil looks all slump-ish and dull. And then you bring out this incredible, intense, gem-like crop from the earth.'



of unexpected lessons. 'The black pepper plants are the ones that really guide us in how the conditions should be,' she says. 'At first, we lost almost all of the seedlings we planted. So then we put in the air conditioning. Because they were signalling, "It's too hot." And that obviously is the one of the main concerns here: that it just gets really, really hot at some points in the day. We think things at the equator are always constantly hot, but it doesn't have that intensity.'

Likewise, as with any other garden, unexpected weather events played their part. A couple of years back, for example, 'we had a terrible winter-rain downpour for two days,' which caused the entire greenhouse to flood. But while the gardeners imagined that all the plants would rot, 'instead, the ginger just burst into life,' Gundula says. 'So we realised this monsoon-like event was good for some of the plants.'

Gundula suggests that dealing with the challenges – and many humbling experiences – that are a seemingly inevitable part of being a gardener is probably helped by 'coming from a family connected with plants and gardening'. Her mother is a landscaper: 'We bounce ideas with each other all the time.' And, she adds, 'My father taught [my mum] how to plant, as he comes from a family in Germany who are all foresters, so it kind of merges together.' That said, Gundula's own leanings as she was growing up were towards art. She studied painting at the University of Stellenbosch, but gradually,

← **Tropical Paradise**

Epiphytic plants such as this basket fern (*Drynaria rigidula*) thrive in the Spice House, and add to its tropical ambience. The original spores of this specimen were collected by South African landscaper Leon Kluge ([instagram.com/leonkluge](https://www.instagram.com/leonkluge)), who has designed a number of award-winning stands for Cape Town's world-renowned Kirstenbosch Botanical Garden at the Chelsea Flower Show. Leon contributed a range of plants and landscaping ideas to the 'layering in' of the additional planting in the Spice House.

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Close Eye

Gundula keeps a keen eye on the health of all the plants, including her beloved butterfly pea (*Clitoria ternatea*), and the various staghorn ferns (*Platycerium spp.*).



it became clear that a career as a full-time contemporary artist wasn't ideally suited to her. 'I'm very shy. I always was very shy,' says Gundula. Yet once she became a gardener, she explains, 'when you're working with nature, it's not about yourself any more. You can get so excited about these things. And then you need to share the message – you lose your ego in that way.' She spent time working in gardens in Europe, and travelled widely too, before returning to the African part of her roots in the Western Cape.

Creating a unique and memorable experience for visitors to the farm is very much part of Babylonstoren's mission. 'That's the magnificence of working here,' Gundula says. 'We are able, as our work, to share in such different ways. Not only visually, but also through giving people an experience that they can make their own – like creating a spiced infusion from freshly picked plants for somebody and sharing that.'

Most of the gardens at Babylonstoren, by deliberate intent, grow only edible and medicinal plants. The Spice House currently includes black pepper, chillies, vanilla, turmeric, ginger, galangal, tamarind, cacao, cardamom, bananas, papayas, curry leaves and a butterfly pea plant – but also features a sacred fig (*Ficus religiosa*) that has been grown from a cutting taken from the original and legendary tree under which the Buddha sat, as well as a plethora



Spice It Up

To create her signature spiced infusions, Gundula uses a variety of dried spices, including cinnamon bark, black peppercorns, cloves and green cardamom.

of ferns, some orchids, and bold clumps of epiphytic Spanish moss (*Tillandsia usneoides*).

Explains Gundula: 'We started off being very strict with ourselves: only spices from the Far East. Okay, that tells the story. But we found the space didn't have enough atmosphere.' So, in the last few years the team has added other tropical and jungle elements, even though they're not all edible or medicinal. 'Here, we decided rather to go into the character of the setting,' Gundula says. And that's precisely the sort of impression the Spice House creates: being here is very much like stepping into a delightfully verdant dreamland.

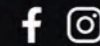
Asked about the overall meaning of being a gardener, Gundula stresses that 'over and over again, it's a humbling experience, no matter what you do'. She's one of the most knowledgeable and experienced gardeners in South Africa, and works within a large team, but recognises that much of the time, for many of us with an interest in plants, 'gardening is an isolated, almost insular occupation, but you're continuously aware that you have the greater role beyond' – a role that is about being one of those who connect with and tend the earth. With her gentle smile breaking through once again, she says: 'It's about giving yourself the time to be okay with being by yourself, so that you can also be okay with being out there.'

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