



**South Africa's Blooming Landscapes:
Wildflowers, Nature Reserves, and Gardens
August 24- September 6, 2025**

Q&A with AHS Host David Ellis

What initially sparked your interest in the fields of horticulture and publishing, and how has your journey unfolded since then and as the editor of *The American Gardener* since 1998?

My interest in plants started in childhood in Zambia, when I spent all my time outdoors climbing trees and foraging wild and cultivated edibles. I used to walk through the bush near my home seeing how many different kinds of wildflowers I could gather to take to my mother. In high school I took a horticulture class and then my first job during college was as a summer worker at Brookside Gardens in Wheaton, Maryland. Initially I was planning to follow my father into a career in geology, but after a few years working at the U.S. Bureau of Mines I found myself craving more creative work. I entered a master's program to focus on science journalism and just after graduation applied for an assistant editor job with the AHS. The rest, as they say, is history.

Given your personal experience in Zambia and South Africa, how do you perceive the uniqueness of the flora in these regions compared to other parts of the world?

My earliest experience with native flora in Zambia was the scrubby woodland—we called it the bush—found in much of the country. The seasons are essentially wet and dry in this subtropical region, so vegetation has evolved to take advantage of the fairly brief rainy season and then find ways to survive drought the rest of the year. During the wet season, all kinds of plants come into bloom, including wildflowers, succulents, and bulbous plants, so it's an exciting time to explore the bush. It's similar to spring in temperate regions, but triggered by moisture rather than temperature. South Africa, further south, has more diverse ecological regions and experiences colder temperatures, but in the area we'll be visiting the climate is more Mediterranean and the dominant ecological zones are fynbos around Cape Town and xeric shrubland/desert in the Karoo. Fynbos is the most incredibly rich and unique ecosystem I have encountered anywhere, and I'm looking forward to experiencing it firsthand again.

This AHS travel program has been especially designed to showcase South Africa's diverse landscapes, rich biodiversity, and cultural heritage. It is also strategically scheduled to take place during wildflower season. What experiences can our AHS program participants expect to encounter while exploring this biodiversity hotspot during this vibrant time of year?

For those who have never visited the Cape region, the wildflower bloom is otherworldly. The combination of succulents, composites, bulbs, and other plants blooming en masse is remarkable both for its diversity and how different these plants look than the ones most of us from temperate regions are used to seeing. The best comparisons I can think of are the spring wildflowers in California and the tulip fields in the Netherlands.

For someone passionate about gardening but new to the flora of southern Africa, what advice do you have for them to fully appreciate and understand the unique plant species they'll encounter on this journey?

I do recommend some advance research about the kinds of plants native to the Cape region and the ecological zones we'll be touring. But of course our guides will be there to help with identifying plants and explaining how these unique habitats evolved.

A highlight of the program will be an in-depth visit to the renowned Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden, established in 1913 to promote, conserve, and display the extraordinarily rich and diverse flora of southern Africa. Which aspects of the garden do you find most captivating?

When I first visited Kirstenbosch in 1985, I was stunned by the garden. I've visited hundreds of botanical gardens around the world in the years since and I still feel Kirstenbosch is the best. This has a lot to do with the incredible flora of the Cape region, where three major ecological zones come together to offer diversity not found anywhere else in the world. The garden's setting against the majestic backdrop of Table Mountain is also part of the allure.

In Nieuwoudtville, AHS travelers will visit the Hantam National Botanical Garden and the quiver tree forest. How would you describe the ecological significance of these sites?

I'm especially looking forward to seeing the quiver tree forest in Nieuwoudtville, South Africa. Quiver trees (*Aloidendron dichotomum*, formerly *Aloe dichotoma*) are remarkable from both a cultural and botanical standpoint. These endangered aloes are not truly trees, but their smooth, silvery gray upright trunks and terminal rosette of succulent leaves give them a passing resemblance to palm trees. They stand out especially in this dry region, where there are few trees or even large shrubs. Their common name reflects the historic use of their hollowed-out branches as arrow holders by the indigenous Khoisan people.

What lasting impressions do you hope AHS program participants will carry home with them from South Africa? For travelers interested in sustainable gardening practices, what discoveries and learnings can they apply in their own gardens?

Much like America, South Africa is a melting pot of cultural influences with a complex history, so I hope everyone will get a sense of how this has affected the cuisine, music, architecture, and lifestyle of this beautiful country. Learning about the complex ecology of the Cape Province I think will make visitors more aware of how climate and geographic features shape the flora of their own regions.