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JUNE 2023

YOUR GUIDE TO SUCCESSFUL PLOT LIVING

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...and much more!**

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Neighbourliness, good & bad



A recent plaintive tale from a tilapia farmer who lost his entire stock of fish when they were poisoned by insecticide residue being sprayed by a neighbour highlights one of the issues of living and working on a smallholding: proximity.

Granted, even a small smallholding gives the occupier very much more space for his activities than a resident of a suburb or, worse, a townhouse complex, where one's neighbours may share boundary walls with one another.

But when one smallholder decides to follow his passion and grow something delicate such as fresh fish in ponds while his neighbour, presumably also following his passion, decides to treat his crop with a toxic compound, the spray mist of which hits the fish, that's a problem. Quite apart from the actual loss of the fish (in the case cited above these were the first cohort, started as fingerlings earlier in the year and reaching harvestable size when the incident occurred), there is the question of what recourse does the fish farmer have? Can he sue his neighbour? And if so how, and for what amount?

Then of course there's the question of whether the crop sprayer acted out of ignorance, or malice? For it could very well be that he was oblivious to the fish grower's activities. Or, while fully appraised as to the activities next door he still chose to go ahead with his toxic spraying campaign.

One can imagine the lawyers for both parties making a lucrative meal for themselves if it ever came to litigation. Not to mention that any pretence of good neighbourliness would have flown straight out of the window thereafter.

Of course, living in close proximity with anybody, in whatever circumstances, is always fraught with potential problems. Loud music, revving engines, screaming kids, barking dogs, neighbouring cats using

one's flower beds as their toilet. All of this and more constitute some of the hazards of urban, suburban and peri-urban life.

But on smallholdings there are additional hazards that many residents are unaware of.

First and foremost at this time of year is fire ~ at least on the highveld. We have written extensively in the past about the need for adequate preparation and fire prevention, neglect of which can render one liable to prosecution and serious penalties.

At other times of the year, however, livestock diseases constitute another potentially deadly intra-property hazard. That's for a couple of reasons. Firstly, although each smallholding in any particular area may have only a few head of cattle, or sheep or whatever, the total number of any one species in a relatively small area of a few dozen plots can be substantial.

Contrast this with a full-scale farm in the country of some hundreds of hectares. Although the total number of animals may be greater, so too is the distance between farms, meaning that it becomes more difficult for disease vectors to migrate between properties and herds.

Moreover, sadly, many small livestock keepers are either simply ignorant of their animals' inoculation requirements, or wilfully neglectful.

For this reason, plots are sometimes referred to by provincial or state animal health personnel as "reservoirs of disease."

The solution, of course, is not difficult. It simply requires diligent care and attention to timeous inoculations, nutrition and hygiene, in the same way that one attends to the health-care needs of one's beloved pets and members of one's family.

Pete Bower ~ Editor

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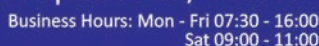
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FRONT COVER

Read all about plot maintenance and infrastructure in this edition.



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El Niño - a dry spell returns?

After four seasons of higher-than-average rainfall ~ on the Highveld at least ~ South Africa is likely headed back into a drier summer or two.

This is based on observations of upper sea surface temperatures in the central Pacific Ocean and the consequent predictions that these observations allow. This is, of course, the basis of the commonly-named El Niño ("little boy") and La Niña ("little girl") effects. El Niño events are understood to result in wetter-than-normal conditions in the Northern Hemisphere and East Africa with drier conditions in the South, while La Niña events result in the opposite.

Generally, it has been observed that the two sets of conditions swap around regularly, even annually, and it has been very unusual (but very welcome by South Africa's dryland farmers and gardeners) that South Africa has enjoyed an unbroken spell of three or four seasons of La Niña.

Rainfall totals measured by the *SA Smallholder* in Eastern Gauteng over the past four seasons have ranged from 940mm for the 2019-2020 year to a

high of 1 254mm for the 2021-2022 year. For the year to June 2023 we have measured 923mm. Using Pacific Ocean water temperatures to predict climate and rainfall patterns worldwide is a relatively new science, requiring deployment of a large range of floating sensors in the ocean, which feed their readings back to a computer by satellite signal. Year by year these readings have become increasingly accurate and comprehensive, allowing scientists to make, hopefully, ever-more accurate predictions. And while there has been a focus on ocean surface temperatures, increased observation of what goes on in the middle of the ocean has thrown up other phenomena which may have a bearing. For example, last year, scientists became aware of a wave ~ more of a ripple, in fact ~ hundreds of kilometres long, which makes its way across the ocean from west to east. They believe this, too, might be part of the ocean surface temperature mechanism. But this wave isn't going to attract surfers to enjoy its curl. It's height? All of 50mm, considerably less than that of an average speed hump. 🌿

Showtime comes to Gauteng

The early months of the second half of the year are going to be busy for Gauteng's show visitors.

❑ Kicking off Gauteng's show season is the popular Kragdag show, now over four days at the Diamantvallei Estate near Rayton east of Pretoria. The show, held in conjunction with Sakeliga, takes place from 9 to 12 August, and promises to be a busy time for exhibitors and visitors alike.

The theme of this year's main event, given the current broken state of South Africa's power system, is "Kom ons bou 'n kragstasie", which gives a good indication that among the 600-odd exhibitors there will be many offering alternative power solutions in all its forms, among other exhibits.

As a secondary emphasis there is an agricultural show

held in conjunction with the TLU, featuring both livestock and agricultural inputs of all types. And a further sub-exhibition focuses on independent education.

Visit www.kragdag.co.za or call 087 231 1644.

❑ Next up on the weekend of 2 and 3 September, is the last "traditional" small agricultural show in Gauteng held at the Walkerville Showground south of Johannesburg. This year's Walkerville Agricultural Show will be the 60th to be held (a year was lost due to the Covid lockdown) and promises to have all the ingredients for a very enjoyable regional agri show, with both agricultural stands, as well as livestock (the rabbit show is always educational), entertainment, and plenty of home industry stalls selling all manner of produce and crafts.

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How to convert your genset to gas

If you, like many smallholders, simply don't have the funds at the moment to shell out on a functioning solar power installation, you will probably have resorted to keeping the lights on, your incubators and pumps running and your fridges and freezers cold, by running an expensive and noisy generator. Which, again depending on your budget, may indeed be a petrol unit.

And you will have noticed a large hole in your monthly budget caused by the cost of fuel for this convenience.

There is a way to reduce this fuel cost, and to reduce the air pollution you are causing each time you run it. And that's by switching to gas as your fuel source.

This is done by replacing the generator's carburettor with a dual-fuel gas/petrol carb, and attaching a gas bottle to the inlet pipe.

You can do this yourself, but the result may be less than ideal as there need to be certain adjustments made to the engine's settings so that it starts and runs effortlessly and most efficiently.

The advantage of a dual-fuel carb is that it means you can run on gas most of the time, keeping a tank full of petrol on hand for when the gas needs replenish-

ing, for example. Changing from one fuel type to the other is as simple as flipping a small tap.

The carb itself sells for less

than R2 000, A dual-fuel carb from Gas Technologies. so with fitting

and setting up you should not be in for more than about R2 500, especially if you have a suitable gas bottle already (filch one from your caravan or gas braai, perhaps?). Add another R1 200 approximately for a 9kg gas bottle, connection pipe and a charge of gas if you don't have one already.

Before you take this step, however, it is worth reading up some reviews on the internet as to how much can be saved on fuel costs, as some have been disappointed, while others have been enthusiastic. 🌱



From page 3

A beer garden under some trees and surrounded by a variety of food stalls, ensures that visitors do not go home hungry.

For more information go to www.walkervillesa.co.za/agsoc.

❑ Finally, two weeks later, the second Organic & Natural Products Expo will be staged at the Sandton Convention Centre, in association with the African Biotrade Festival. These two events will take place from 14 to 16 September.

TRADE SHOWS

The event covers a wide range of natural and organic sectors including health, body & beauty, food & beverage, home and lifestyle. It is endorsed by the South African Organic Sector Organisation and sponsored by the City of Johannesburg.

Registration is still open for exhibitors. Registering for the 3-day event also gets you a spot on the Organic and Natural Portal, an online directory of organic suppliers, for a year.

For more information go to www.organicandnaturalportal.com/expo/. 🌱

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Here be dragons! All about dragon fruit

This month's article is about a group of exotic fruiting plants with about the most exciting name imaginable, matched only by the appearance of those fruits and the plants that bear them.

They are also very close to the authors heart as they have been the subject of his active research and industry involvement for the last seven years.

You may be forgiven if you have never heard of, much less tasted, this new addition to one's fruit basket, because dragon fruit were almost unknown in South Africa even a decade ago. However, these plants deserve a place in any smallholding with the correct climate, as they require little input and can be very productive if one understands their



The bracts or "scales" on this fruit give the plant its name.

Another in our series of articles on "orphan" and unusual crop species, courtesy of the University of Pretoria horticulturalist Jason Sampson

requirements.

Dragon fruit is the oddly descriptive name given to a group of vining, jungle adapted cacti from South and Central America that bear large, juicy fruit with a strange, scaled looking peel that gives the appearance of a fanciful dragon egg.

The fruits come in three functional flesh colors in varying intensities: white, red and a luminous magenta purple, with small, edible seeds.

Grown for food and medicine for centuries in the tropical Americas and the Far East, these strange plants and their gorgeous fruit have become more and more popular in the rest of the world for a number of reasons, not least being that as cacti fruit, they require about a tenth of the water that traditional fruiting crops require to produce commercial quantities of fruit.

The fruit have something of a reputation as a "superfood", which scientific investigation has found to be rooted in the high levels of unique anti-oxidants that give the fruit their intense coloration, a class of

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From page 7

chemicals only found in cacti, and beetroot of all things!

Fruiting multiple times in a season, and requiring little space, a variety or two of dragon fruit should be considered in a food plant collection even if one has no plans to grow them commercially.

Care must be taken to grow improved, named varieties of the fruit, as many older types bear very bland fruit.

Indeed, one species in the genus (*Hylocereus undatus*) is classed as an invasive species in South Africa, but since that specific type bears by far the least inspiring fruit of the group in terms of both the taste of the flesh and the seeds, which are often bitter, there is no reason to promote, or grow it. (Although, as it is a member of a commercially important genus, one can get permits to farm with it if one wishes.)

Although related to prickly pear the dragon fruit plant on first inspection looks rather different. The plant is a vine, and needs to climb a support to the top, where it then hangs branches toward the ground. It is these hanging branches that bear flowers and fruit.

The flowers are huge, usually white (although one can find varieties in both red and pink) and open at night, closing in the early morning. Pollination is usually done by bees in South Africa.

Plants start flowering close to the summer solstice and

then again as the fruit ripens in a cycle that can have three to six distinct fruiting events, depending on variety and environment, until about May.

Varieties can be self-fertile or require cross pollination. High-end varieties are almost invari-



Sliced fruit showing white, red and purple fleshed varieties.

ably self-fertile but fruit size can be increased by cross pollination so it is considered good practice to plant a mixed orchard of two to three compatible types. The fruit is very attractive and can be eaten fresh, out of hand, or used in value-added products such as juices, ice-cream etc. As a berry it freezes well in chunks and keeps colour well if pH is kept at about

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Dragon fruit plants on the classic umbrella trellis at a commercial farm in Brits

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An unusual, reddish purple flower on the variety known as 'Connie Mayer'.

should always be considered when planting, and as a rule, fruit with coloured flesh is sweeter and has a more rounded flavor than fruit with white flesh, although there are exceptions.

With multiple fruiting cycles, a small orchard can be a reliable source of income during season (which is roughly end of December to May).

Plants require support, and can be grown up a concrete pole with a tire support mounted horizontally on top in a classic "umbrella" shape, or on a trellis. Remember that plants can weigh a lot, and any support needs to be robust.

Since the plants produce aerial roots that help them cling to a support, creosote or other chemically treated poles should not be used as the plants can absorb these chemicals.

Being jungle adapted, plants do require mulching and some irrigation. Drip irrigation is best, and plants benefit from rotted animal manure in their mulch. In some parts of the country they can benefit from light shade cloth, and can do very well in a mixed orchard with Moringa for shade.

Propagation is done with cuttings, and it is very important to buy only from reputable sources to

5.5 and juices are not exposed to direct light.

Dragon fruit has even found its way into attractively colored gin made from magenta fleshed varieties.

As the market requires fruit of good taste and sweetness,

named varieties

ensure that one is supplied with high quality cultivars and planting material.

Plants established from cuttings can be bearing well in as little as two years.

There is a lot of variety available for growing in South Africa. Talk to someone knowledgeable before you choose your orchard make-up.

Two organisations to approach if you wish to actively farm dragon fruit are the Dragon Fruit Growers Association of Southern Africa, and the Amorentia Sweet Dragon Fruit Marketing Co. Both were formed with the express intent of promoting the industry and educating farmers.

Planting should be done with healthy, mature material cut at a node any time from late spring to late summer.

Varieties are easily shared in this way, and there are people with extensive, non-commercial collections.



A small selection of different commercial varieties.

Image: Jackye Riddle of Dragons Den Farm.

There are over 300 named varieties available overseas, many of which are not commercially desirable however. There are farmers importing material of the best legally, and it is best to contact the associations mentioned to find out more. 🌱

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Backyard chickens: Feeding myths

There are a few myths about feeding backyard chickens, which can result in your flock not receiving a nutritionally-balanced diet.

A common misconception is that if they free range they will be getting everything that they need to keep healthy and productive. This might be the case if you can take them to a new area almost every day, so that the plants and insects can recover where they have ranged and they have a fresh set of choices. But they are not always to be trusted not to be distracted by un-nutritious plants. It is too haphazard to expect that your pasture will provide the right balance of species, minerals and other ingredients.

So it is advisable that they are fed a carefully balanced feed as well, to ensure the right proportion of protein, carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals.

If you are keeping chickens for eggs, consider what goes into making an egg. Most modern chickens are bred to create an egg every 26 hours. An egg is made of water, protein and other nutrients and covered by a hard shell. In order to be able to create this egg, your hen has to have all the ingredients ready in her body.



Feeding free range chickens.

Some smallholders think it's enough to allow the flock to free range and then give them some supplementary mealies or other grains and seeds. Again this is unlikely to provide the right proportions to meet their nutrition needs.

Another myth is that you can save money by supplementing the feed by growing fodder for the chickens. This creates a great deal of extra work, and while leafy greens are a tasty treat, they are not going to provide enough protein or carbohydrates. And the hens don't actually eat less feed.

Another option is to cut weeds to feed the chooks. This may be a free source of food and will give them some variety but they will still need the usual amount of feed.

Some keepers think that if they feed their chickens scraps, they will eat less feed, which saves money. And this is true. However, scraps such as bread and pasta, which chickens enjoy, are not healthy for them in large quantities. They lead to obesity, which in turn creates other health problems and a drop in production.

There is also the concept of fermenting the feed. It is thought to make it more nutritious, so the hens will need less. While there is evidence that fermenting makes some aspects of the feed more bioavailable, there is not much proof that the chickens eat less of it. It also requires careful management, otherwise it goes sour and the chickens will not eat it.

Another practice is to only feed at certain times and in certain quantities. What happens then is that the hens will binge when the food is available. It also means that the dominant members of the pecking order will not leave enough for those lower in the hierarchy, who will then suffer a loss of condition and

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How to insure your smallholding...

People living in peri-urban or rural areas are vulnerable to various risks.

Climate change is bringing about more extreme weather conditions which affect our livestock or crops, while in some areas levels of crime have reached epic proportions.

So the canny smallholder's thoughts turn to insurance.

How does insurance actually work? Insurance is a legal agreement between two parties ~ the insurer and the insured. The insured pays the insurer an agreed amount of money, usually monthly, and the insurer undertakes to pay the insured where loss or damage has taken place to any of the items that are covered by the insurance policy.

Anyone who is trying to make an income from their land needs to consider protecting themselves from the effects of drought, theft, disease, flooding, fire and storms.

Only about 40% of commercial farmers have crop insurance and smallholders or small farmers regard insurance as virtually unaffordable.

In traditional forms of insurance assessing losses in

...and its contents agricultural contexts carries a very high cost. Because of this, there is a rising trend in some developing countries to make use of index based insurance (IBI) for farmers and smallholders. The index is developed based on weather-related information, such as rainfall, temperature, evapotranspiration, soil moisture and vegetation. The data is gathered through the use of weather stations and satellites and historical averages are stated. With index insurance, if the measure drops below, or is above, a level that has been agreed on beforehand, the policy will pay out to the farmer or the insured. The Agricultural Research Council (ARC) has developed a weather-based index and is going to be partnering with government and insurance companies to bring this insurance option to farmers and smallholders.

In the meantime, smallholders can take advantage of the fact that they can insure against very specific risks. For example, if they have livestock, they can insure against foot and mouth disease, redwater fever,

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productivity. There is also the old idea that you will save money if you buy all the ingredients and make your own feed. This does not make sense when one considers the wholesale prices commercial manufacturers will pay for ingredients. They will also have large machinery to mechanise the whole process. We are all cost conscious in these difficult times, so rather consider how you can prevent waste. Generally pellets are less wasteful than mash. Look at your feeders and check if there are waste-reducing feeders available.

A common problem is that wild birds, along with rats and mice, are getting an unfair share of the chicken feed. Examine your coop to see where you can prevent these freeloaders from getting in.

Deworm your flock regularly, so that you are feeding the chicken and not internal parasites.

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Storing feed correctly includes ensuring that insects and rodents are not able to get at it. On the other hand good ventilation ensures that you don't have a problem with too much humidity and the danger of mould developing.

Only buy in bulk if you can store the feed safely. 🌱

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| 13mm | x | 25mm | 1.00mm |
| 13mm | x | 25mm | 1.25mm |
| 13mm | x | 25mm | 1.50mm |
| 13mm | x | 25mm | 1.60mm |
| 13mm | x | 25mm | 2.00mm |
| 25mm | x | 25mm | 1.60mm |
| 25mm | x | 25mm | 2.00mm |
| 25mm | x | 50mm | 1.50mm |
| 25mm | x | 50mm | 1.60mm |
| 25mm | x | 50mm | 2.00mm |

GALVANISED BEFORE WELDING

| cm | x | cm | WIRE DIA in mm |
|------|---|-------|-------------------|
| 13mm | x | 13mm | 1.60mm |
| 13mm | x | 25mm | 1.60mm |
| 25mm | x | 50mm | 2.00mm |
| 25mm | x | 50mm | 2.50mm |
| 25mm | x | 50mm | 3.00mm |
| 50mm | x | 50mm | 1.60mm |
| 50mm | x | 50mm | 2.00mm |
| 50mm | x | 50mm | 2.50mm |
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FINANCIAL MATTERS

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heartwater fever, gall sickness, pulpy kidney or blue tongue, depending on the species and what is prevalent in their area. They will have to prove, where relevant, that insured animals have been inoculated against the specific illness within twelve months of their death and show proof that the serum has been correctly stored and used as prescribed. Or they can insure against impotence in a pedigreed bull or ram, as long as they have a certificate to prove fertility at the time of insuring.

More generally they can cover their bloodstock and livestock against fire, lightning, storm, disease, violent accident, accidental poisoning, freezing and attack. They can cover the animals while they are being transported as well.

They can also be covered against the risk of their livestock breaking through fences and roaming onto roads or neighbouring land, where they may destroy crops or interfere with breeding stock.

Obviously they can insure their assets such as buildings, dams, irrigation systems, plastic tunnels, boreholes, machinery, electronic equipment, vehicles, tractors and implements.

They can get cover for loss of crop. However, insurers usually state preferred norms and standards in their farming practice, such as date and density of plant-



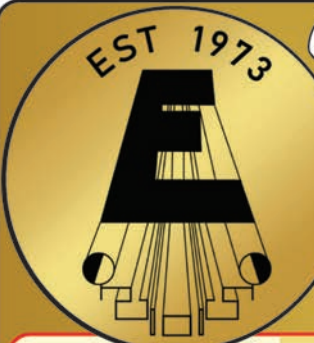
You can insure your bull.

ing. Some insurers cover damage to produce and vehicles due to potholes, but the insured needs to be very clear whether their policy includes this. They could also insure hay stacks or bales.

Some companies cover one for dishonest and unlawful actions by employees that could harm your finances or reputation.

If you run your business from you plot you can have business interruption insurance. If your business is not agricultural you can get cover for your products and services.

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Tips for painless winter plot maintenance

While you may have finished mowing, your firebreaks are all prepared and it's too early to think of ploughing and planting for next summer's crop, there are still plenty of tasks to keep you busy through the cold months.

For now is the ideal time to carry out all of those routine maintenance jobs that would otherwise be neglected. These include fence-post and gate painting, fence repairs generally, and repairs to leaky pipework, reservoirs and tanks.

Before embarking on your maintenance programme, however, it makes sense to draw up a plan of what needs to be done, what needs to be bought in order to do it, and what the obvious sequence of the jobs should be. It is pointless, for example, to start by painting fence corner posts before resetting them in the event of their pulling out of true. Rather do all the fence-post resetting first, then reset and tension the wires, and finally set about painting the posts and gates. When painting gates and posts beware of taking on more than you can finish in a day or two at a time. This may seem counter-intuitive, and will need to be carefully explained to workers who would otherwise do all of one single task before moving on to the next in the sequence. Thus, rather strip the

loose paint of a single gate, treat any rust and prime the gate, with each action following on the previous one as closely as possible. This prevents fresh rust building up overnight as a result of dew, or the accumulation of dust. When it comes to paint, there is an optimum time between coats where adhesion is greatly enhanced. Leaving primers and undercoats to dry too much before overcoating makes for a less complete bond.

Now is also a good time to replace leaky tap washers, and attend to leaky ball-valves in water troughs and tanks. A highveld winter, when the ground is dry, is also an ideal time to check one's buried pipework for leaks, which would otherwise not show up as clearly in moist soil.

In your machinery shed the most obvious winter maintenance tasks include removing unused fuel from petrol tanks, and replacing used engine oil, cleaning air filters and greasing any bearings and points that you can reach. If you sharpen your own chainsaw chains, spend some quiet hours in your workshop is to sit down with a blunt chain, and some round and flat files and slowly work through the chain link by link, to ensure you have a stock of sharp chains on hand when needed next season. 🌿



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How to protect your summer soil in winter

Among the tasks you can perform during the “quiet” winter months here is one that will pay off handsomely in the forthcoming growing season, namely soil maintenance. For much of South Africa, and certainly on the Highveld, the best time for a bit of soil care will be during the winter months when frost and lack of rainfall make growing in outdoor facilities difficult. There are a few key strategies you can implement over the next few months that will ensure your soil is in the best condition in time for sowing season in spring.

First among these is to ensure that what you already have doesn't go to waste, in the form of erosion control on your existing land.

If you are leaving patches of land empty during winter, take measures to protect these spaces against erosion. Erosion will strip away valuable topsoil and negatively impact soil structure. This is especially prevalent during the dry season when the lack of moisture heightens the risk of erosion.

Mulching is an easy way to protect your soil immediately. Using an organic material such as wood chips, grass cuttings or straw, you can cover your bare soil



Wood chips make excellent mulch.

areas to conserve moisture and prevent wind erosion. Mulch acts as a barrier, protecting your soil from the sun and wind. In this way, your nutrient-rich top soil will still be there come spring.

For larger worked pieces of land, you can use contour ploughing to protect your topsoil. This technique involves ploughing along the contour lines of the land, which means ploughing with the slopes. This helps create small ridges and furrows that slow down water runoff, and create small wind protection barriers, reducing erosion.

A more contemporary approach, of course, is to forego working the soil almost entirely, by opting for a no-till cultivation routine.

During the quiet season, you can take this time to conduct soil tests. This means that when planting season starts, you already have a good idea of how to get the most out of your soil and you won't have to scramble to improve your soil at the beginning of the season.

A specialised soil testing service will more than likely conduct the tests, do the lab analysis and make recommendations for appropriate inputs and amendments. All you have to do is take soil samples and send them off to the lab.

Now is also the best time to start introducing more organic matter into your soil, to allow ample time for it to break down and be incorporated into the soil before planting. Compost and manure will help improve soil fertility, water retention and nutrient capacity.

Although crops should be rotated throughout the year, you can use this off-season time to plant a crop

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to re-introduce some nutrients to your soil, depleted during the high season.

You can grow a cover crop that will not only add nutrients back into your soil but also help prevent against erosion. Popular winter cover crops in dry climates include vetch, sweet clover and crimson clover. These fall under the legume family and are excellent fixers of nitrogen. They must be planted long before the first frost hits, so ensure they are well-established by the time the cold snaps start.

Cover crops such as these are also less water-



Vetch is a popular cover crop.

demanding and will survive with a little drip irrigation.

These can be harvested and used as animal fodder in spring, or ploughed back into the soil when you are ready to prepare for the new season.

Other frost resistant crops you can consider include kale and some root vegetables (carrots and turnips). Plant these during winter, using drop irrigation to maintain soil moisture. Then, when spring arrives, choose a crop from a different family to plant in the same spot.

Crop rotation can also help disrupt pest and disease cycles, helping your long-term pest control practices. By rotating crops, farmers can break pest and disease cycles, reducing the risk of soil-borne pathogens and pests that can overwinter and affect subsequent crops. Additionally, different crops have varied nutrient requirements, and rotating them helps balance soil nutrient levels. This prevents depletion of specific nutrients and encourages replenishment, resulting in healthier soil with improved structure, fertility, and water-holding capacity. Overall, crop rotation during winter helps revitalise the soil, setting the stage for healthier plant growth and a more productive harvest in the coming summer. 🌱

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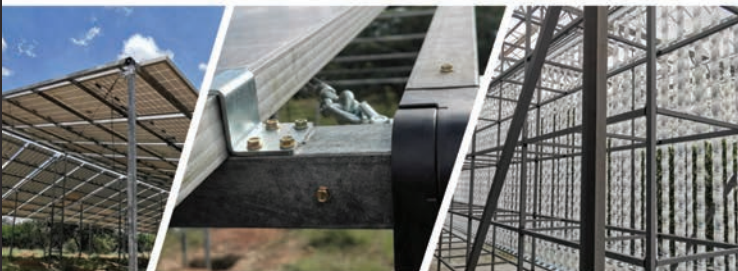
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ON THE PLOT

Sustainably built, but it needs maintenance, too

If you have embraced the idea of living more sustainably on your plot, chances are you have one or more structures built out of sustainable materials. This can include ecobricks, pallet wood, reclaimed material and more. Like normal buildings, these structures will need regular maintenance and repairs. Winter, or your dry period, is the ideal time to do that. By implementing proper and regular maintenance practices, small farmers can ensure the longevity and functionality of their eco-friendly infrastructure.

To begin with, start doing regular and consistent inspections. During a visual inspection you should look out for cracks, loose boards, loose nails, rot, crumbling cement work. If the fix is quick, do it then and there. Don't procrastinate. Structures built with ecobricks (two litre soft drink bottles stuffed until rigid with plastic bags) offer both durability and sustainability, thanks to their plastic exteriors. If made correctly, ecobricks can be used to build raised beds, benches, simple rooms and build-ings. Although plastic, the bricks are probably going

to be held together by something ~ cement or concrete. When using ecobricks, make sure the area is suited for good drainage to prevent any build up of moisture around your structures. Check regularly for cracks in the joining cement as this might indicate shifting foundations or moisture. Weatherproof the structure against sun and rain damage by applying a sealant or paint. This will help protect the concrete, as well as the bricks themselves. A popular material for simple structures around your smallholding, used pallet wood can be cheap and effective. However, you must do regular maintenance to ensure the wood continues to last. Regular inspections of the wood must look out for loose nails or rot. This can indicate a moisture problem and will

Continued on page 23



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A raised bed built using ecobricks. Image: ecobricks.org

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cause the structure to collapse eventually. Ensure proper drainage around the structure to prevent this. A good coating of a wood preservative such as Waxol during the construction phase will go a long way to prolonging the life of pallet wood structures.

Pest control must be performed to prevent wood louse, termites, wood-boring beetles, and even rats and mice from causing damage to your pallet wood. Signs of an infestation include hollow-sounding wood when you knock on it, presence of sawdust or small holes in the wood.

Non-chemical pest control options can include using a sealant or paint to close up any holes. Natural pesticides and insecticides will also help get rid of



Holes in the wood and wood dust are signs of pests.

infestations. Keeping your structures neat and tidy, and clean of any moisture build up will help prevent infestations going unchecked.

Eco-friendly construction can sometimes be as simple as re-purposing an item. For example, an old farm gate can be repurposed into the wall of a crush for cattle. Reclaimed material must have proper maintenance scheduled to ensure its continued use.

Metal items should be cleared of any rust before you repurpose them, and then kept painted thereafter. This will help prevent water damage and any further breakdown of the metal. This includes old fencing, metal drums, gates and droppers.

Old tractor tyres can be repurposed into raised growing beds, or beds for potatoes or strawberries. You can paint them vibrant colours which will spruce up your garden, and also help protect the outer layer of the rubber from sun damage.

Old oil or diesel drums can be cut in half and repurposed as feed or water troughs for livestock. Ensure you clean them very thoroughly beforehand, and seal any openings.

Discarded PVC pipes make excellent trellises for tomatoes, beans or peas. Their plastic makeup means they will not easily be water or sun damaged. Thicker plastic piping can be repurposed into seedling trays, or small growing pots. 🌱



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IN THE FIELD

Untreated soft rock phosphate is OK for organic

With most South African soils being deficient in optimum levels of phosphorus (the P part of the N, P, K plant nutrition trilogy) the traditional method of overcoming the problem, at least in heavily-worked soils, has been to treat with a dose of rock phosphate.

However, because rock phosphate is not readily water-soluble much of the value of this additive remains locked in the soil and unavailable to the plants. Unless, of course, the phosrock is chemically-treated before application, to render it more readily soluble.

But here's the snag: the chemical treatment of phosrock, while it may make the latter soluble, renders it unsuitable for use in certified organic growing systems.

Now, however, there is a solution, in the form of Talborne Organics' soft rock phosphate, which is not chemically treated, thus rendering it organically acceptable. Moreover, a comparison of the properties of Talborne's soft phosphate with the more common

treated rock phosphate shows little in the way of differences.

This is not an additive for the home garden, or for small patches of land, however, as it is available only in 25kg pockets, or in 1 000kg bulk bags for commercial application. In commercial use it can successfully be spread using standard tractor-drawn dry material spreaders and it is available as both a powder or granule.

For more information: Talborne Organics, visit www.talborne.co.za. 🌱



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Cordless: the way to go? Or a way to go yet

Fancy the idea of battery operated tools in your workshop and garden? With the push by many manufacturers to design and launch battery-powered tools and garden equipment they are becoming increasingly popular and widespread. But there are a couple of things you should know before you head off to your favourite tool shop. Firstly, the tools themselves seem remarkably inexpensive. Problem is, they are mostly sold without a battery or batteries, and without a charger. And here's the thing: It's the Li-ion batteries and intelligent chargers that are expensive, often more than doubling the cost of the overall purchase.

Next, know that each make has its own batteries, for its own tools. At this stage at least, batteries are not interchangeable across different makes, and indeed are sometimes not even interchangeable between all tools of the same make.

Why is this? Clearly each make wants to keep control of the batteries for its own tools because this is where its development and design budget has been sunk, which it would like to recover before allowing others into its sector.

In most ranges, too, one finds a variety of battery sizes, and a variety of chargers. This makes it possible for an occasional hobbyist, whose workload is light on his drill, or angle-grinder, to set himself up at much lower cost than a professional journeyman who spends his workday drilling and cutting. He will be able to buy much more powerful batteries, and fast chargers, to enable him to keep working, where the hobbyist would have needed to take a tea-break when he ran out of charge. Of course, it is possible to buy more than one battery, keeping charged spares in one's toolkit in case the first one goes flat half-way through a job. The most common output voltage for battery-powered tools is 18V DC. Larger tools, particularly those for garden use such as brushcutters,

chainsaws and mowers, often need something more, in which case two 18V batteries are used together, to give the machine 36V. But 18V/36V is by no means the only voltage used in the battery-power sector.

There are tools that use 20V, or 24V and any number of variants in between, illustrating again why it is unlikely that the tool market will in time settle down to a universal battery and voltage.

Users are sometimes disappointed by the working life of a single battery charge, complaining that their tool stopped working after only a few minutes because the battery was flat. Thus, careful reading of reviews is necessary to ensure you buy a tool that won't disappoint you.

Furthermore, if you are thinking of changing over from corded tools, or petrol-powered garden equipment, to battery power, it is wise to look at all of your corded workshop tools, and all of your garden machines. Some workshop items simply can't be battery-powered, such as your bench drill, table saw, thicknesser, bench grinder or welder. But others, such as your hand drill, angle grinder or even your heat gun, most certainly can. Bearing in mind that you want your batteries to be interchangeable across all of your portable workshop tools, your next step is to look for a brand where this is possible, and which offers you a suitably wide range of models.

Finally, if your usage of garden equipment such as your mower, blower, brushcutter or chainsaw, is extensive (ie you need these items for your small-holding or farm), battery-powered machines are probably not for you as they will run out of charge long before you complete your day's work.

But for townies, battery-powered machines are ideal in the garden, combining the convenience of go-anywhere working, with neighbour-pleasing noise levels when in use and zero carbon monoxide emissions. 🌱



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IN THE GARDEN

Build a bug hotel for your critters

Any vegetable farmer worth his or her salt knows that bugs play a very important role in pollinating your plants. There are a few ways in which we can encourage these bugs to frequent our gardens, particularly during the winter months when food may be harder for them to come by. Bug hotels attract beneficial insects such as ladybugs, lacewings, and predatory wasps, which act as natural pest control agents. These helpful insects prey on harmful pests like aphids, caterpillars, and mites, reducing the need for chemical pesticides. Creating a bug-friendly habitat fosters biodiversity on your plot. By providing suitable homes and resources for a wide range of insects, bug hotels contribute to a diverse ecosystem that helps maintain ecological balance and resilience. Although there are pre-built ones for sale, they are simple enough to do yourself. You will need to find a few pieces of sturdy wood such as old pallet wood or repurposed materials. You will need to find nesting materials to fill your hotel with ~ these can range from bamboo canes, pinecones, twigs and dry leaves. These act as nooks and crannies into which the bugs can take refuge. Build a frame, as big or small as you like, ensuring it is securely fastened. Inside the frame, stack your chosen materials vertically. Alternate between different sized and shaped components to ensure variety. Secure your materials to the backboard using wire or cable ties. Different insects have different preferences for space, so using varying materials will mean you can accommodate a number of different types of insects.

Hollow plant stems, such as bamboo canes or reeds provide good nesting sites for solitary bees and beneficial wasps. Wood blocks with pre-drilled holes offer hiding places for beetles and other insects. Small stones, bricks or cinder blocks create crevices that are attracting to ground-dwelling insects such as spiders and centipedes. Pinecones, dry leaves and straw act as bedding for beetles and insects that overwinter. (This typically involves finding a protected location where they can enter a state of dormancy or hibernation to allow them to conserve energy throughout the cold months where there is little food available for them.)

Make sure your bug hotel is located in an area close to your vegetable garden or crops, but elevated off the ground to protect it from your livestock and pets. Keeping it off the ground will also make sure it stays dry and prevents any rot to the structure. Regularly inspect and clean your bug hotel. This means removing debris, and making sure the structure is dry and free of mould. 🌱



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A spiced winter veg chutney to warm you

By now, you should be well into growing your favourite winter vegetables. As published in the May *SA Smallholder*, there are a number of vegetables that you can continue to grow throughout winter despite dryer climates, frost and cool temperatures.

These vegetables often lend themselves to hearty soups and stews, good enough to warm you up throughout the colder months. But, if you are looking for ways to preserve your winter harvest, you can consider making a spiced vegetable chutney. This works well as an accompaniment to curries, roast meats, or as a spread to go with strong cheeses on farmhouse bread.

Ingredients

2 cups winter vegetables (such as carrots, turnips, beetroot, parsnips, radish, butternut, sweet potato) finely chopped

1 cup onions, finely chopped

1 cup apples, peeled and finely chopped

1 cup brown sugar

1 cup apple cider vinegar

½ cup raisins or cranberries

¼ finely chopped ginger

1 teaspoon mustard seeds

1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

½ teaspoon ground cloves

½ teaspoon ground turmeric

½ teaspoon salt

Method

In a large pot, combine the chopped winter vegetables, onions, apples, brown sugar, apple cider vinegar, raisins or dried cranberries, crystallised ginger, mustard seeds, cinnamon, cloves, turmeric, and salt.

Stir the mixture well and bring it to a boil over medium-high heat.

Reduce the heat to low and let the chutney simmer, uncovered, for about 1 to 1.5 hours, stirring occasionally. As the chutney cooks, the vegetables will soften and the flavours will meld together. Cook until the chutney reaches a thick, jam-like consistency. Taste the chutney and adjust the seasoning or sweetness if desired. You can add more sugar or spices according to your taste.

Once the chutney is ready, remove it from the heat and let it cool to room temperature.



Transfer the chutney into sterilised jars and seal tightly. Store the jars in a cool, dark place for a week or two to allow the flavours to develop before using. You can adjust the spices or sweetness levels to suit your preference. Store in the fridge after opening. 🌿

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EVENTS

Solar Power Systems Course

This comprehensive photovoltaic solar design and installation course was created to address the need of individuals, organisations or small businesses that require basic information on the size, rating and installation of solar systems. Course objectives include being able to assess what equipment should potentially be of good or poor quality, distinguish how photovoltaic technologies differ from each other, know what the most appropriate energy saving technology is for a particular application, perform calculations for the design of a solar power system, and more.

No formal prerequisites are required to attend this course. This is the first leg of a twin course.

Date: 1 July 2023

Cost: R1 950 per person.

Location: Diamond Valley Estate, Pretoria, Gauteng

Contact: 087 231 1644 or email info@kragdag.co.za

The Cannabis Expo, Durban

The Cannabis Expo is the global marketplace for education and innovative products and businesses serving the cannabis industry and its medicinal, agricultural, financial and lifestyle aspects. The expo hall at The Cannabis Expo will feature over 100 exhibitors representing the full spectrum of the cannabis industry. Browse and enjoy cannabis-infused meals, treats and drinks. The event will also feature a vibrant outdoor festival environment. Presentations around cannabis-related topics that cover health, agriculture, legislation, finance and more will also be held throughout the expo.

Date: 28 to 30 July, 2023

Location: The Globe at Suncoast, Durban

Contact: Visit www.thecannabisexpo.co.za for more info or contact sarah@thecannabisexpo.co.za

Sakeliga Kragdag

KragDag focuses on sustainable and independent solutions (and even do-it-yourself plans), to help make you less exposed to and dependent on a state determined life.

This year's event is subtitled "Kom on bou n kragstasie." At KragDag you will find solutions to the challenges of energy, water, safety, health, food production, education, transport and construction and a creative entrepreneurial mindset is encouraged.

This year you can expect 330 exhibition stands and 165 exhibitors in the agricultural sub-expo, free seminars and lectures, a variety of activities on a wide range of farming matters, as well as the arena which will include shows with horses and mounted warfare, cattle breed shows, and drone demonstrations. Also, a large variety of refreshments and an amusement park and entertainment that includes anything from ox-carts to helicopter rides. Exhibitors include solar solutions, water collection and purification, horticulture aquaponics and hydroponic systems, security alarms, beekeeping, wind power, cleaning and recycling, hydroponic green fodder, firefighting and fire equipment, storage tunnels and greenhouses, heritage seeds, kitchen equipment, livestock protection, pool equipment, pest control, and more.

Exhibitors can book a stand at www.kragdag.co.za/webtuiste/stal-uit.

Date: 9-12 August 2023. 08h00-17h00.

Cost: R100 per adult (children up to 18 free), but by registering in advance you get a 50% discount.

Register at www.kragdag.co.za/besoeker/kaartjies

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THE BACK PAGE

Solar speak: SA's new lingo

The current trend towards relieving Eskom of its burden of supplying us with electricity, namely the headlong rush into solar systems, has spawned some new terms in our language.

For example, when walking or driving through your neighbourhood do you find yourself examining the roofs of nearby houses for an array of solar panels? And if you spot some, do you do a quick count of their number, and assess their size, and where and how they are mounted?

And then, do you compare your findings with your own installation? That's called "panel envy" if your neighbour has more panels than you, or "panel smugness" if you have more than him.

But if you are unfortunate to have suffered a bout of panel envy because he has more panels than you, sometimes you can console yourself by saying to yourself "ah, but his panels are smaller/less powerful/older than mine..."

Hopefully, of course, you have installed a system large and powerful enough to allow you to avoid the next new term, which is "charge anxiety."

Charge anxiety occurs when you become concerned that your usage may overwhelm the capacity of your battery assembly. This can occur in two ways. Firstly, if you are careless in the use of your electrical appliances you run the risk of running your battery flat, and thus being left in the dark. More commonly, however, you run the risk of charge anxiety on cloudy days, which may result in insufficient sunlight on your panels to charge your battery up for the dark hours ahead. Closely related to the panel smugness mentioned above is "solar smugness" which is that insufferable boastfulness that emerges among the "manne" at a braai when, having discussed the dreadful state of the nation, the conversation turns inevitably to load-shedding and the measures one has

in place to overcome it. For, it is now almost guaranteed that one in your group will mutter smugly "of course, we have solar..."

Whereupon the inevitable question, much like schoolboys comparing their willies in the shower, will be "How big is your inverter?" in the fear that his inverter is bigger than yours.

And you, having told the group the size of yours, will equally inevitably ask "and yours?"

Finally, we Saffers have known since birth that we are generally blessed with almost endless days of bright sunlight, which makes the installation of rooftop solar systems, and solar geysers, a no-brainer. For now, however, you will find, as a new convert to solar, that you become more acutely aware of just how blessed we are with sunlight in this country. And one begins to realise just how backward we are here, considering the great advances in homespun solar installations in countries far less blessed by the sun than we, such as Germany and the Netherlands.

Germany, for example, is light-years (pun fully intended) ahead of us. There, if you have an excess of capacity the central electricity-generating authority will pay you for it when it is released into the grid. Their electricity meters, you see, are clever enough to work in both directions, charging you for what you use, and paying you back for what you supply. That's a long way off here, I suspect, for apart from the glacial pace at which officialdom works in South Africa, Eskom is hardly in a position to shell out funds it doesn't have for electricity being sold to it, rather than by it.





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