



# FOR THE LOVE OF TREES

*Lee Currie meets up with Mount Edgecombe's very own "tree man", Alistair McWade*

**O**ften a passion for a certain field of interest is passed on to us by our parents. For Alistair it was an abiding love and respect for the environment, particularly trees, instilled by his conservationist father Trevor McWade.

"My dad was a raconteur of note and well known for his tree walks," recalls Alistair. "He could turn people who previously had no interest in trees into ardent fans. He had so many stories; one he loved to relate was about the Ziziphus Mucronata or Buffalo Thorn tree. In Zulu culture, this tree is known as the tree of life. If you look at a branch you'll notice it has a beginning and an end and doesn't follow a straight line but rather a zigzag pattern, just like our life path. Sometimes we go this way and sometimes that way, but we

## TAKING ROOTS

Tree man, Alistair McWade

get to our destination just the same.

"When someone dies away from home a family member would pick a branch of the Ziziphus and travel (usually to an urban area) to make arrangements for the burial. The family member would place the branch on the deceased person's chest, as they believe the spirit of the person passes into the branch. The envoy would return home, carrying the branch, where the spirit would be free to continue its journey alone. The day after my dad died, I cut a branch of the Ziziphus for him to take on his final trail."

Alistair is kept busy with his landscape and garden maintenance business on the vast grounds and fairways of Mount Edgecombe Estate, which is also his home. Much of his work involves removing alien trees. "People ask why we remove these as they're often beautiful to look at – but their effects are very detrimental. Alien trees use vast quantities of water, much more than our indigenous variety, and often have tap roots which literally tap into our ground water reserves.

"These plants have been deliberately or accidentally introduced into the country and are capable of invading even stable natural vegetation. They are increasing in South Africa

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and have already caused dramatic and probably irreversible changes to the plant cover of our country.

Alistair continues, "It is said that when you plant a tree you are selfless, for you plant not for yourself but for future generations and for the benefit of the environment. My father planted hundreds of trees on the golf courses at Mount Edgecombe, but there is one that will always be a constant reminder of him.

"There was a huge Blue Gum (on the 18th hole, course two) that stood right in the middle of the fairway. One day it was struck by lightning and died. My father had it cut to about three metres from the ground and planted a young Baobab behind it. This has the effect of sheltering it from the Tbox and he gave strict instructions that no one was to cut the Blue Gum until the Baobab was as tall as the stump – it became known as 'McWade's Baobab'. As long as I'd been living on this estate, I had yet to see this tree with any leaves. On the day my dad passed away I noticed that it was covered in tiny new leaves, which I believe was symbolic."

Alistair believes we can make a difference by recognising invaders, removing them and replacing them with indigenous plants. \*

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