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- Duncan Serapelwane,  
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Forester Caroline de Villiers and Rocco with *Tarconanthus camphoratus*, *Podocarpus elongatus* and *Combretum erythrophyllum* in the background.



## For the love of trees

She once dreamt of saving Amazon rain forests but today, after travelling the world, Caroline de Villiers is putting down roots and making a difference back home.

By ARNOLD KIRKBY

**A**claimed forester Caroline de Villiers has come full circle and returned home to the mountains of Grabouw in the Western Cape, where she grew up. She now grows trees for the landscaping industry and helps local farmers eradicate alien species in rivers and catchment areas, and rehabilitate these areas to their pristine state.

Together with employee and shareholder Michael Hermanus, De Villiers and her husband, Meyer, run a thriving wholesale nursery. Their focus is on growing indigenous trees but they don't disregard the value of non-invasive exotic ornamental trees.

The Department of Agriculture in the Western Cape last year honoured her by

awarding her with the title of Top Entrepreneur in the Smallholder Forestry Category.

De Villiers says she has an affinity for oaks even though these trees are not indigenous to the Cape – they have, however, been an established part of its environment for about 350 years.

This dynamic young mother, conservationist and businesswoman has packed a lot into her life already. After matriculating from Herschel Girls' High School in Cape Town in 1993, she took a gap year and travelled extensively through Europe, as well as the Middle East and the Far East. In this time she worked as a tractor driver on a kibbutz in Israel, visited Egypt and Turkey, and spent time in various European countries before working a harvest on an apple farm in

Kent in the UK to build up reserves to go to Thailand.

Young and idealistic, she had her sights set on helping to save the rain forests of the Amazon and wanted to prepare herself by doing a BSc Agriculture at Stellenbosch University. But she switched to forestry in her second year because she wanted to be more hands-on in the natural environment and not the man-

**She has an affinity for oaks even though these trees are not indigenous.**

made agricultural environment. She was not that keen on growing wood commercially, but had a penchant for saving indigenous forests and environments.

While studying at Stellenbosch, she managed to fit in a trip to South America, visiting Chile and Bolivia, where she travelled by dugout canoe along the Riberalta River, one of the major tributaries of the mighty Amazon River.

Little did she know how this experience would impact on her life later on.

After completing her forestry degree in 1998, Caroline joined the Working for Water Programme in the Cape, where she was project manager on nine secondary industries projects in which employment was created by adding value to the by-products of alien clearing. These industries included charcoal, furniture and screen production. Some of these have developed into companies and are still active.

She then joined the Department of Trade and Industry, which, together with Wits University, was doing research to create employment through the creation of small industries using waste material and alien vegetation as raw materials. De Villiers started the Kuyasa Paper Project in Kommetjie, in which black-wattle bark and recycled paper was used to make upmarket packaging for the wine and tourism industries.

During this time she got married, and when her engineer husband accepted a position in 1999 to help with the reconstruction of infrastructure in central Mozambique after serious flooding hit the country, she upped sticks and followed him.

While in Mozambique, De Villiers project-managed the HIV/Aids Awareness Campaign among communities and road workers along the road being constructed between Caia and Inchope, on behalf of the United States Agency for International Development (which funded some of the construction projects). Before leaving the contract she was also asked to do a social, environmental and economic impact study of the newly constructed road linking northern and southern Mozambique, thereby opening up a vast stretch of land that was previously isolated.

When she arrived, she says, there was abject poverty in the area and the new road brought with it both good and bad aspects. On the positive side, supplies and aid could now reach the communities, but negative aspects such as deforestation, slash-and-burn and an increase in outsiders coming into the area resulted

in an escalation of prostitution as well as HIV/Aids.

When the project ended, the couple went to Bahrain in the Middle East, where De Villiers worked in an office and studied economics via correspondence. In 2004 she went to London to complete her MSc degree in International Development at the University of London.

After completing her MSc, she and Meyer decided it was time to come home and start a family. They returned to her stepfather's farm, Kromvlei, near

### **There is a great demand for "instant" trees for landscaping.**

Grabouw, where De Villiers had grown up. As an entrepreneur, she was always on the lookout for a business opportunity. She noticed a vacant plot of land along the N2 next to the Thandi Farm Kitchen, a black-empowerment project in the area.

In 2007, De Villiers and Hermanus, who previously worked on Kromvlei, together with two employees started cultivating trees from cuttings and seed. The open tract of land at Thandi Farm Kitchen was used as a "shop window" from which the trees were marketed and sold.

In February this year, the business moved from Thandi and the nursery, Themba Trees, was consolidated at New Forest Yard on Kromvlei farm. At present they supply 52 types of indigenous trees and 19 exotic tree types to government departments, municipalities, landscapers and retail nurseries. They have 12 employees and a stock of 60 000 trees, and intend propagating another 10 000 trees this coming winter.

There is a great demand for "instant" trees for landscaping, and it takes up to six years to get the trees to these sizes. Themba Trees offers trees of up to 3 metres in 2.5, 10, 20, 50 and 100-litre bags.

As part of their efforts to minimise their carbon footprint, De Villiers and her

partners make their own potting medium and compost, gathering raw material from local farms and plantations. They source their stakes from the area, and recycle all their plastic and waste paper.

In line with their environmental and social responsibility vision, De Villiers and Hermanus envisage Themba Trees giving hope (which is what Themba means) and a sense of place to its employees, as well as other organisations that are looking to improve the environment and the well-being of individuals. They would also like to work with other organisations interested in planting trees with nutritional value and greening areas in the region.

Themba Trees is also involved in Arbor Day activities by facilitating and planting trees at schools, NGOs and municipalities – an important part of their vision to create awareness among the youth of the importance of conservation and the environment. ♣



**Employees Michael Fortuin and Victor Kuiken hard at work in the nursery cementing down a pole that will accommodate an overhead sprinkler.**