

Township Flowers

Elliot Mlalazi has created an oasis in the township he calls home on the West Rand. Situated in Rietvallei the flowers and green foliage are an indication of his dedication to his trade.

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HEARTLINES Feature Service

Real Las Vegas radio repairs, Good Luck Spaza shop, Sanie's Inn, hairdressers, tailors, carwashes, butchers, crèches and impromptu car-exhaust technicians are all signs that the spirit of entrepreneurship is spilling over into the streets of Rietvallei.

Previously defined as an informal settlement, this area on Gauteng's West Rand is slowly formalising. It is also home to one of the few black-owned nurseries in Gauteng.

Getting to EG Plants in Rietvallei requires deft negotiation of rough and tough roads, their edges chewed ragged by wear and weather.

The nursery is surrounded by a makeshift plank and wire fence. Low, full-leafed trees obscure the view through this curious barrier. There's a gate fashioned from the springs of an old mattress, making one wonder if here, indeed, be dreams.

A visitor to the nursery has to step through a resilient cabbage patch, flanked by alert ears of maize, pass through another gate and then is immediately be struck by colour.

Reds, pinks, whites, greens, purples the flowers jostle in song, shaded by a green canvas canopy.

This is Elliot Mlalazi's nursery, an oasis in the "loc'tion", where playful sprinklers wash over the primulas, pansies, marigolds, daisies and verdant ground cover. Everything inside this exuberant place, held in by wood and wire, feels very far away from the ordinary world.

The name EG Plants, comes from the initials of Elliot and his wife Gladys. And Elliot, dressed in blue workpants and black takkies caked with earth, has come a long way in the three years since he started the nursery.

"It's starting to get small in here," Mlalazi says as he points out land earmarked for expansion. He delivers flowers to 31 nurseries based in the West and East Rand, as far off as Brakpan and Springs, and recently bought a 2,5 ton truck to help with extra deliveries. Mlalazi came to South Africa from Zimbabwe in 1980.

After working as a cleaner at a church in Weltevreden Park for 15 years, Mlalazi passed his driver's license and got a job at a nursery in Fourways as a delivery-truck driver and sales representative. It was here that he developed and nurtured his love for plants. "I used to steal time and watch how they did the cuttings and planting just to learn," he says. His wife Gladys remembers how they would spend weekends selling hanging baskets on street corners and going door-to-door with flowers. "Everything I've learnt about flowers and planting, I've learnt from Elliot," she says, as she starts preparing space in the nursery for the winter flowers. Gladys plays an active role in the business and helps with deliveries and flower-planting.

They've come a long way as a couple. "Can you imagine, from a domestic worker to this?" Mlalazi asks.

“I wanted to call the nursery Lavender Forest. Lavender is my favourite flower. I even put some of the leaves in my tea because I like the smell of it. But my wife helps out so much with the nursery, I felt I had to include her in the name,” Mlalazi says.

They’ve been married for more than 15 years, and have four children. “Simphiwe, the eldest, recently completed a course in computers. He also helps me in the nursery,” Mlalazi says.

He’s lived in Rietvallei for 10 years, in a house close to the nursery. Mlalazi jokes about how the nursery is a sanctuary when he has arguments with his wife, “I just come here. It’s peaceful and nice and it smells good.” He says he doesn’t have a proper garden at home, “You know what they say about shoemaker’s children,” he laughs.

Mlalazi employs six people from the local community.

His vision is to get more of the youth involved. He already has five young people who are learning about plants.

“I want to open up a section of the nursery for growing vegetables and get them involved that way. It’s a way to earn money by selling and to keep them off the streets.” he says.

Mlalazi is pleased because one of the local youths has shown an interest in landscaping.

“My dream is to see the youth in this area involved in plants and flowers. We can really go somewhere with that. The people here only know about tomatoes and onions,” Mlalazi says.

Rietvallei’s soil is poor, so only low-intensity subsistence farming can be supported.

Last winter proved to be a bad one for EG Plants. “We lost a lot of plants and had to start all over again,” Mlalazi says. But his hard work and perseverance have paid off: the nursery is full of plants again and the orders keep coming in.

“I’d like to see more people starting their own businesses. Vuku’zenzele, meaning get up and do it for yourself, is the motto I live by,” Mlalazi says.

“In anything you want to do, you must put your heart in it and be prepared to learn from others,” Mlalazi says.

“Don’t be afraid to start from nothing. If you’re faced with an opportunity, you must use it. Believe in yourself, even if you feel you lack knowledge, skills or education,” he adds.

“I like to work, I like to do things. I started off selling chickens. I even sold clothing. I lacked the knowledge and the skills but I felt I had to do something.”