

Miscellaneous notes

VARIOUS AUTHORS

A TRIBUTE TO PROF. KRISTO PIENAAR (1922–1996), DOYEN OF SOUTH AFRICAN GARDENING

Few people have made a greater contribution to popularizing gardening and an appreciation of nature in South Africa than Prof. Kristo Pienaar (Figure 1). Through the printed media and as a television personality, Kristo became nothing short of a gardening and environmental celebrity. If, on any particular evening in his gardening programme, he suggested that a certain plant should be eradicated from the South African gardening landscape, the gardeners of the country rallied behind him and started chopping out the plants the very next morning. It would be fair to say that, during the 1970s and 1980s, Kristo was truly Mr Gardening in South Africa. Kristo sadly passed away on the 6th of April 1996 at the age of 73, after a long battle with prostate cancer.

Kristo Johannes Pienaar (always with great emphasis on the Kristo with a K) was born in Bokfontein near Rustenburg on 4 July 1922 to parents Jan Leon Cachet Pienaar and Hendrina Johanna van der Merwe. He had two brothers and two sisters, and grew up on the slopes of the Magaliesberg. Kristo started his school career at the age of four, sitting quietly under his mother's desk, while she taught her class at the local school. He subsequently skipped some grades and matriculated from the *Höer Volksskool* in Heidelberg at the age of 16. He achieved an M.Sc. in Botany from



the University of Pretoria. His Ph.D. was done at the University of Stellenbosch and dealt with the Liliaceae. He then became a teacher at Monument High School in Klerksdorp where he remained from 1944–1960. In 1962 he joined the Department of Botany at the University of the Western Cape as senior lecturer, and he later became the head of the department.

Kristo married Christina Wilhelmina van Rooyen, the love of his life, on 15 December 1945 at the Dutch Reformed Students Church in Pretoria East. It was love at first sight when on the first day he saw Christina, he turned to his friend and said 'There is the woman I'm going to marry.' Kristo and Christina had four daughters (Ronel, Riana, Christa and Adri) who between them gave them four granddaughters, five grandsons and four great-grandchildren. One of his granddaughters aspires to walk in her grandfather's footsteps and wants to become a great botanist one day.

His hobbies included gardening (of course!) and rugby which he played for Northern Transvaal. He supported the team for many years until loyalty to his province of residence made him change sides to Western Province. This caused a major fallout with Prof. Anna Neethling-Pohl who was of Blue Bull blood, and they did not speak for many years! He also enjoyed staying abreast of new scientific literature, caring for his wild birds and listening to Pavarotti. He loved westerns/cowboy movies, old musicals and love stories, and never missed the antics of JR on *Dallas* nor an episode of *Haasdas se nuuskas* on TV!

Most of us will remember Kristo as the kindly gentleman of *VeldFocus* in the 50/50 nature programme on TV, which he presented for six years. Or perhaps you are one of those who remembers him as the kindly grandfather in a television shoe polish commercial. Kristo enjoyed acting and appeared in a number of films namely, *Fratse in die vloot*, *Rip van Winkel*, 'n *Seder val in Waterkloof* and *Herfsland*.

His talents were not limited to television and he was once a presenter for *Radio Good Hope*. He was the first programme presenter to do an interview with Prof. Chris Barnard after the first heart transplant in 1967, and he wrote and presented a series called *Goue gedagtes* on Springbok Radio, which was later published as a book. Other programmes included *Ons en die wetenskap* and *Vra vir Kristo*. He also wrote a story for the children's radio programme *Siembamba*, in honour of his first grandchild Klippie, which he read to the children himself.

He is also the author of more than thirty books and other publications of which some of the most popular is undoubtedly the *South African What flower is that?* and *Everyone's guide to gardening*.

During his reign as the king of gardening, he was also on the Board of the National Botanic Gardens, a member of the then Western Cape Regional Council for Cultural Affairs, and Chairman of the Bellville Amateur Acting Society. He was the head elder of his church and from time to time involved in the Heart Foundation of South Africa. He judged the national police stations' gardens and was involved with the African Violet Society. He was city councillor and mayor of Bellville as well as magazine and newspaper columnist for *Die Burger* and *Sarie*. His weekly gardening column *Vra vir Kristo* in *Die Burger* was immensely popular.

In 1996, the Professor Kristo Pienaar Floating Trophy for Environmental Education and Awareness was created by the then SA Army in his honour and is bestowed on units within the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) in recognition of the best contribution with respect to environmental education.

Many have felt the need to bestow honour on him. There is for instance a hybrid tea rose (which he personally selected from a group of potential candidates) named after him in recognition of his efforts in creating an awareness of indigenous plants in South Africa. There are also disa hybrids named after both him and his wife, Christina.

He was the recipient of a Laureatus Award in 1987, which is the highest award of the Alumni Association of the University of Pretoria (Tukkies). In 1989 he was given the freedom of the city of Bellville when he was named *Die Burger* Resident of the Year. In 1992 he was made Honorary Colonel in the Police Force. In 1997, a posthumous award was made to him, in memory of his contribution towards environmental education in the SANDF, which was received by his daughter. He has received the Nederburg Prize for the arts and the SABC Artes award for the best television programme, *VeldFocus*. He was also awarded the gold Order for Excellence in Service to the Country by the president, which is the highest award that a country can bestow on a citizen.

Above all, Kristo was a family man. He considered his home to be his castle and his wife his refuge. Affectionately known by his daughters as 'Tito', he used to call them *peervoël* whenever they did something silly.

The family travelled the country extensively, as Kristo believed that you had to see your own country before travelling abroad. The Kruger National Park was his personal favourite and travel was always accompanied with a strict programme of what had to be achieved on each day.

At a time when very few people flew, Kristo took his daughters flying on Saturdays, first in a small plane and later in a Dakota, so that they could experience flight. When asked to sum up his character in three words, three of his daughters each said the following: 'larger than life', 'diligence, exuberance (for life) and warmth' and 'faith, family and nature.'

A fellow botanist gave his impression of Kristo as a person with a 'passionate urge to broadcast his knowledge as a teacher', 'a person with infectious enthusiasm' and on meeting him at a botanical gathering 'you had the feeling that you were talking to a reporter, a communicator, a person focused on the spreading of information'.

It was the city of Bellville's habit to name streets after their mayors. Kristo, however, requested that the Tygerberg Nature Reserve's Environmental Education Centre be named after him instead. Thanks to the legacy of this great man, the Tygerberg region now has an outdoor classroom in the form of the Kristo Pienaar Environmental Education Centre, which is a place where children (and their parents) can learn about nature and hopefully gain some respect for the beauty of our country, thus, fittingly paying tribute to a man who dedicated his life to the (environmental) education of others.

'Die meetsnoere het vir my in lieflike plekke geval, ja, my erfenis is vir my mooi—The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed I have a beautiful inheritance'

Psalm 16: 6

Inscription on Prof. Kristo Pienaar's tombstone

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