

The Shamba Times

Kenya Horticultural Society North Coast District

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North Coast District

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Our cover photo for this edition of The Shamba Times features two of our favourite coastal flowering shrubs, *Adenium obesum*, the Desert Rose and *Plumeria rubra*, more commonly known of course as Frangipani.

Happily, *Adenium obesum* is indigenous to Eastern Africa, whilst *Plumeria* hails from the Americas, specifically Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean, as well as South America. Both are widely planted here on the Kenyan coast and each produce wonderfully colourful and strong blooms when the climate suits them. A couple of real go-to flowering shrubs that should do well in any coastal garden.

Chairman's Notes

Hello everybody, and welcome to the 2026 April edition of the Shamba Times.

This is the time of year at which we gardeners and shamba-holders keenly await the onset of the annual long rains that allow maize to be planted and grown throughout our district, and which refresh our gardens and refill members' underground water tanks.

Rainfall is hard to predict with great accuracy, and too much rain can quickly pivot from a blessing to a curse as we have seen upcountry earlier this season, where more than 60 people lost their lives in heavy flooding in and around Nairobi. The debate about global climate change rages on, but many scientists would point to the increasing frequency of extreme weather events as being a sign that global warming is impacting climate, both at a macro and a micro level.

What can we do about any or all of this? Well, it behoves us to listen, to watch, and to read about what is going on in our natural world, and at the very least to be aware. Mitigating the effect of extreme weather events is to an extent within our own reach; water collection during heavy rains being one example of what we can do ourselves, and smart planting being another.

Gardening and horticulture have never been entirely plain-sailing. To a large extent we are all at the mercy of the soil in which we plant, the water that we have access to, the extremes of drought or flood that may occur from time to time, but we gardeners know that there is often 'a work-around' the obstacles we face, and the rewards of planting, growing, and harvesting usually outweigh the costs and challenges of our achievements.

After all, we love what we do.

Crispin Sharp

KHS North Coast District AGM 2026

The KHS North Coast District 2026 AGM was held at Turtle Bay Beach Resort at 10 a.m. on Tuesday 24 March.

Members gathered at the venue in Watamu and were offered tea and coffee to welcome them in, having already seen that outside the main entrance there was a vibrant plant sale, and inside the lobby of the hotel the KHS Pop-Up Shop was richly stocked and in full sales mode. On sale were lots of new seed packets from South Africa, rain gauges, gardening tools, fertilisers, feeds, pots and a wealth of lovely homeware and nice things to have.

The meeting began at 1030 in the airconditioned comfort of the main hall, and our KHS NCD secretary, Carrisa Nightingale, read the notices of apology and formally convened the AGM which was held in the presence of our KHS National Chair, Susan Church, who had very kindly joined us all the way from Naivasha.

Following the official business of the AGM, (minutes of the meeting will be shared with all members later) the election of officers, committee members and so on, Susan Church gave a short welcoming talk and a brief outline of KHS aims and ambitions for the year ahead.



It was then time for the highlight of the AGM, namely a talk by renowned naturalist and evolutionary biologist, Dr. Dino Martins, whose talk was titled 'The Magic of Seeds'. As always, Dino held members enthralled as he talked about how seeds work, the matriarchal importance of seeds, the risks for any plant in seeding, the history of seeds, and the political and economic importance of seeds globally. It was a fascinating talk, full of remarkable facts and anecdotes, including the fact that palm seeds, entombed alongside King Herod more than 2,000 year ago have been removed from the king's tomb and successfully germinated. Extraordinary. And there was more, we learnt that Cycads can take 400 years to mature and up to 800 years before they reproduce successfully,

It was an excellent talk and gave substance to our AGM. Thanks to the committee that made the event happen, and to all members who attend-
ed.



NCD AGM - 24 March 2026
At Turtle Bay Beach Club in Watamu.
With Guest Speaker Dr. Dino Martins.
Dr. Dino Martins is an evolutionary biologist who is renowned globally for his work, his publications, his teaching, and his commitment to the good of the natural world of Kenya.

The Pop-up Shop
The KHS pop-up shop will be in full swing in the lobby of Turtle Bay. Full of gardening must-haves and more. Don't miss it.

NCD Plant Sale
As usual we shall be holding a sale of plants outside the venue. Please bring along any plants you wish to sell. Buy too!

You can join KHS at the AGM. By all means pay your 2026 subscription at the AGM.

My Garden in Watamu

Five years ago, I moved to Watamu permanently, to live near my daughter and son-in-law. I bought a half-acre plot next to theirs and we began designing a small house and garden. I had already put ideas on paper for the hardcore design for the front garden and landscaping for my plunge pool and Terrace at the back. The plot contained only three Neem trees and a tiny Baobab which had luckily been missed by the contractors. I moved it, talked to it, encouraged it, and now it's a sturdy 10 ft high tree! I love it!



I knew I would miss my English garden with its wildflower meadow and herbaceous borders and a greenhouse I could spend all day in. I knew nothing of tropical gardening but I was determined to take this opportunity to learn something new and, with the invaluable help of Jonathan Baya, I made a start by planting trees and shrubs as a good backbone. I also planted Bougainvillea all around the perimeter walls. I had no idea of the range of colours that Bougainvillea produced. Peaches, oranges and soft pinks...wow!!

I like to add a touch of secrecy in the garden by not being able to see everything at once. Paths and corners leading to surprises and hidden spaces.



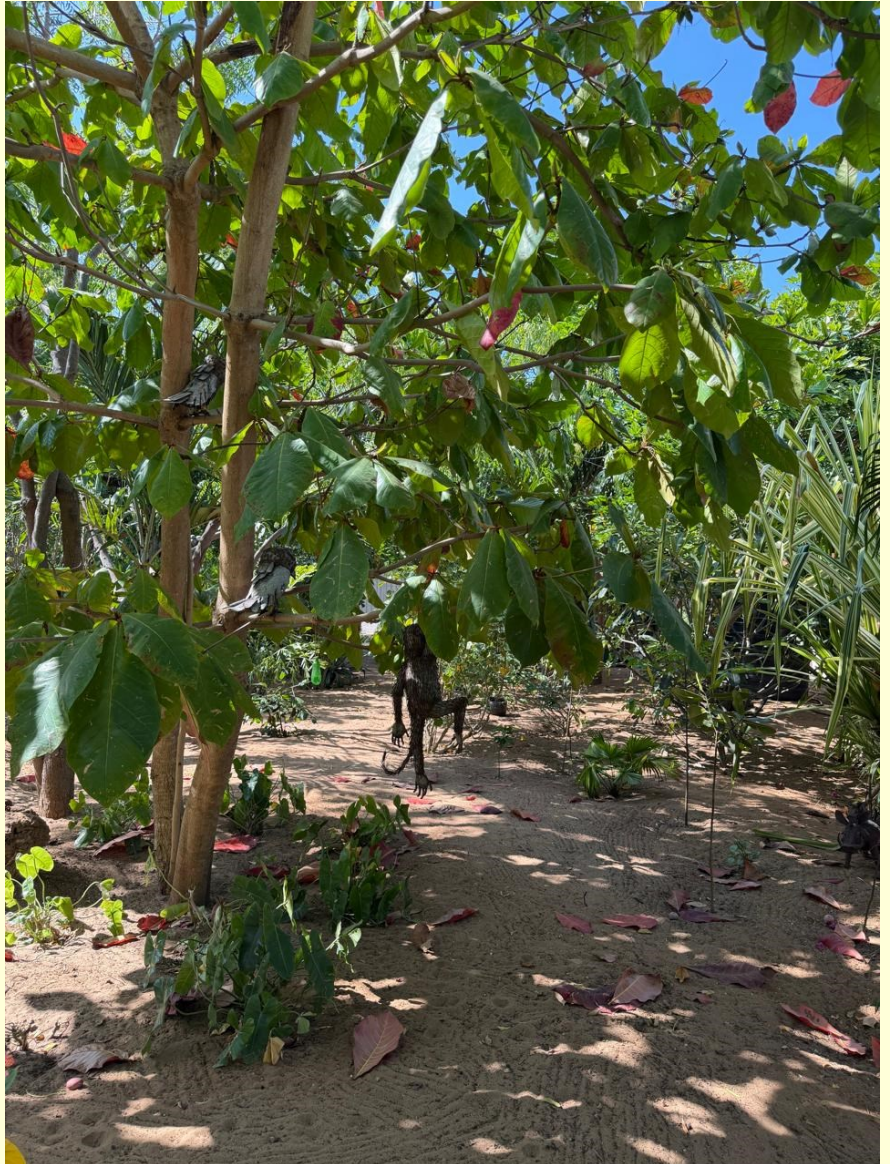
Gardening is an art and art is important to me in the garden. There's a small sculpture made for me for a dear friend and there's a stone cow hiding in the grasses. Garden jewellery adds a touch of colour and the sound of tinkling glass whilst I'm having my sundowner makes me feel very calm. I have several different seating areas in my garden where I can stop and sit depending on the time of day.

By Beth Ellis

A tiny forest is in the process of being created between our homes, hoping that it will be a place where my great grandchildren can play hide and seek, where they can find monkeys and owls and other metal sculptures hiding amongst the foliage.

A special gift from my daughter was a Desert Rose which sparked my interest and I now have a small collection. Watching them grow to produce a variety of vibrant colours has been exciting.

I imagined having swathes of green grass running through my garden but that didn't last long. Drought soon changed all that!! Instead, Frangipani, Gardenia, Hibiscus and Agave have very happily taken their place.



I spend every afternoon relaxing in my Loggia, from where I watch countless Quelea and Weavers taking their afternoon tea. I love to hear their noisy chatter.

Who doesn't love taking cuttings and germinating seeds? The buzz when tiny green shoots burst their way through the soil to become who knows what!

If only I could remember to label them!

My garden continued ...

Because my garden is small, there are no bold drifts of colour that I was inspired by Piet Oudolf (a Dutch garden designer) to use. But instead, I have created small pockets of individual colours and shapes.



If only age would allow me to remember the wonderful names of these amazing plants, which I have come to love and appreciate. Learning their particular habits is an ongoing process and I hope that I can make the most of the chance that I have been given to learn a new way of approaching the making of a garden.

Later...I have just returned from a trip and am sitting on the verandah with a glass of wine enjoying the dying light and listening to the late to bed birds settling down in the trees. I am thinking 'I am home - this is my garden and I love being here.'

Editor's note:

Beth Ellis' garden in Watamu is newly created from scratch and offers a very interesting insight into the challenges and rewards of creating a new garden here on the Kenya Coast.

Hopefully we shall be able to persuade Beth to host a KHS meeting in her new garden, as and when she is ready to do so.

Plants and trees of the NCD.

A gallery of members' recent photographs



Ophrypetalum odoratum

Carissa Nightingale, Kuruwitu



Turraea wakefieldii

Jennifer Grumbley, Malindi



Orchidaceae orchid

Betty Bundotich, Kilifi



Punica granatum

Carissa Nightingale, Kuruwitu



Majidea zangueberica

Dipa Rakesh Vajani, Malindi



Strophanthus petersianus

Norbert Rottcher, Kilifi



Bougainvillea

Philip Mason, Takaungu



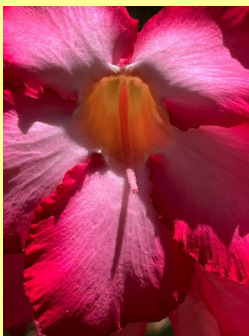
Andansonias digitata

Mimi Shaw, Malindi



Feretia apodanthera

Gail Outram, Kilifi



Adenium obesum

Mimi Shaw, Malindi



Bougainvillea

Colleen Street, Vipingo



Orchidaceae orchid

Betty Bundotich, Kilifi

My Gardening Story

Introduction

Samini Ngumbao's story continues our series where we ask KHS NCD gardener members to write about their gardening lives - not only the challenges but the solutions and successes, too.

Hello everybody. My name is Samini Ngumbao and this is my gardening story.

2006 was the year I was welcomed into the world of gardening by my boss, Mrs Susanne King. The truth is that it wasn't easy for me as I had never done any gardening and didn't really have a clue what to do. The garden was 22 km north of Malindi at Che Shale and 100 m from the Indian Ocean with only silky sand, no soil at all, just bare sand, some tall coconut palms and a few small Neem trees.



The very first tree I planted in 2006 was a frangipani. The late Mrs Vanessa Aniere helped me and showed me what to do as my boss lived in Dar es Salaam at that time and only came to check on the construction of the house and the poor empty garden once a month.

I started attending the Gardeners Courses arranged by KHS and really enjoyed them and got more and more interested in gardening. The late Lady Marian Langham and Mr John Golds were a great inspiration to me and I appreciate all they have done for KHS. One of the most important things I learned was to make compost. Through the years, we have made a lot of compost that has made the development of our garden possible.

By Samini Ngumbao

After some time, I started a vegetable garden with seeds I was given on a Gardeners' Course.

Jonathan Baya and Katana Baya were our instructors and they are my role models. I have learnt a lot from them.

The hardest job I did in the garden was making a lawn. I started by covering the area in seaweed and as much compost and soil as I could get. We then waited for the rain as it would have been impossible to do it in the dry season. I planted thousands of little grass cuttings and we now have a beautiful green lawn that keeps the garden nice and cool.



I am very proud of the garden and how it looks today. But the biggest challenge now is lack of water as our well has become salty. But we are learning which plants accept the salty water and which don't. So, we must adapt to that situation.

Editor's note:

This garden out at Che Shale is another garden that we hope KHS members will soon be able to view, demonstrating as it does how important the knowledge, skills and care of those who do the real work in our gardens is.

A Botany Lesson: Herbaria

In a previous Botany Lesson, we learnt about the acquisition of live plant specimens from the wild for the purposes of study. What happens to these plant specimens once collected? Although plant specimens may be kept alive, they are more commonly dried and pressed to preserve the quality of the specimen. A collection of such preserved plant specimens and associated data which is used for scientific study is termed herbarium, plural: herbaria. By contrast, a botanical or botanic garden contains a collection of living plants, again for the purpose of scientific research, as well as conservation, display, and education. In this Botany Lesson, we learn about herbaria.

The making of herbaria, like plant acquisition an ancient phenomenon, represented an important step in the transformation of the study of plants not least in moving away from relying on classical texts, which lacked sufficient accuracy for identification, to one using actual plants. As their inventor, the Italian physician and botanist Luca Ghini (1490-1556) realised, the latter was fine during the growing and flowering season when he would spend an hour or two walking with his students among the plants in his garden, pointing out species, structures, and medicinal traits relevant to the day's lesson. But when winter came, the garden was rather useless for demonstrations. However, Ghini could fall back on his hortus siccus, his dried garden, created by placing freshly gathered plants between two sheets of paper and applying pressure to flatten them and absorb moistures. Each dried specimen was then glued onto a page in a book and annotated. The simple, basic techniques used then have changed very little...

There are five "steps" to a herbarium: Collection of plant specimens; Preservation; Pressing; Drying; and; Mounting. To facilitate the identification process, as much of the plant as possible (such as roots, flowers, stems, leaves, seed, and fruit) needs to be preserved. To preserve their form and colour, plants collected in the field are carefully arranged and spread flat between thin sheets, known as flimsies (equivalent to sheets of newsprint), and dried, usually in a plant press, between blotters or absorbent paper.

During the drying process, the specimens are retained within their flimsies at all times to minimise damage, and only the thicker, absorbent drying sheets are replaced. The dried specimens are then mounted on sheets of stiff white paper (called *exsiccatum*, plural: *exsiccata*) and are labelled with all essential data, such as date and place found, description of the plant including its colour, altitude, special habitat conditions, and the name of the collector. The sheet is then placed in a protective case. As a precaution against insect attack, the pressed plant is frozen or poisoned, and the case disinfected.

Most herbaria utilise a standard system of organising their specimens into herbarium cases. Specimen sheets are stacked in groups by the species to which they belong and placed into a large lightweight folder that is labelled on the bottom edge. Groups of species folders are then placed together into larger, heavier folders by genus. The genus folders are then sorted by taxonomic family according to the standard system selected for use by the herbarium and placed into pigeonholes in herbarium cabinets.

So, as we see, a herbarium provides a repository, a permanent physical library of plant life but, beyond that, what role does it play? Let's look at the herbarium in our midst, the East African Herbarium (EAH), which is housed in the Botany Department of the National Museums of Kenya (NMK) in Nairobi. Apart from being the largest botanical reference collection in tropical Africa, with over 1 million preserved plant specimens and an ever-growing collection, the EAH plays a pivotal role in advancing plant taxonomy, conservation science, biodiversity assessments, and ecological research. This is particularly so because the scope of each of these fields is often shifting and evolving.

Compiled by Wendy Taylor

Take plant taxonomy as an example: a long-standing, commonly-accepted system of classification which involves identifying, describing, grouping and naming plants and uses a hierarchical structure from the broad kingdom to the specific species, as originally developed by Carl Linnaeus. But it is well-known for being a 'turbulent' or constantly shifting field, as new genetic data force the reclassification, splitting, or merging of taxa (named groups of plants).

The EAH serves a wide range of users, whether as researchers, experts/professionals or students, from taxonomists, ecologists, botanists, ethnobotanists, conservationists, environmentalists, horticulturists, and foresters; to pharmaceutical scientists; veterinary researchers, forensic investigators, palaeontologists and climate scientists.

Apart from its scientific significance, the EAH has particularly interesting history, too - with two quite separate strands to the story. It may be surprising to learn that some 62,000 botanical specimens in the EAH collection originate from the herbarium of a research institute founded during colonial rule in German East Africa in 1902 at Amani in the Usambara Mountains of the northeastern region of present-day Tanzania. Das Kaiserliche Biologisch-Landwirtschaftliche Institut Amani was mainly concerned with economic botany but also with the study of the flora and fauna of the area. Laboratories, experimental plantations and a tropical botanical garden were established. It gained an international reputation as a renowned research centre.

After World War 1, Amani continued operating as a research institute under British administration steadily building its collection of plant specimens. A notable collector was Peter Greenway, who became botanist-in-chief in 1928 until 1950. He was joined in 1948 by another well-known botanist, Bernard Verdcourt, whom we learn was "very happy at Amani," with "a fantastic flora at his door, and an historic herbarium..." to work on. Later in that same year, however, the Amani herbarium and library were packed up and transferred to Nairobi together with the two botanists concerned.

A word more on the Usambaras. The mountains form part of the Eastern Arc Mountains, which stretch from Kenya through Tanzania, and are covered by tropical cloud forests that have endured a long period of unique evolutionary endemism. An example of a plant which is considered endemic to the Eastern Arc Mountains and with which we are all familiar is the commonly-called African Violet. In 1892 Baron Walter Saint Paul-Illaire, then the governor/district commissioner of the Usambara District, sent seeds of a plant he had discovered to his father in Germany. There it was later identified as *Saintpaulia ionantha* though now known as *Streptocarpus ionanthus*. Subsequently, in 1950, E.P. Roberts described one of his own collection of African violets from the East Usambaras as *Saintpaulia amanuensis*, the ending "-ensis" in a botanical name meaning "from", in this case, Amani.

In the same vein, Rupert Watson, in his article describing a recent journey through the Usambara Mountains, tell us that: "Several trees and plants evidence their indigenous origins with the scientific species name *usambarensis*." His examples include *Afrocarpus usambarensis*, *Podocarpus usambarensis*, *Rumex usambarensis*, and *Impatiens usambarensis*.

Meanwhile, in Nairobi, a herbarium had been established at the Coryndon Memorial Museum in 1931 under the auspices of Evelyn R. Napier, who was employed as its first botanist from 1930 to 1934. A grant was given for this posting by Ernest Carr, a keen supporter of the museum and owner of the Carr brand of biscuits. At the start of her employment, Evelyn spent several months training in the herbarium at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in England. She built up a collection of over 4,000 mounted specimens with another 3,000 awaiting identification and mounting. She was a keen collector herself with several plants in her collection being named in her honour as new species.

A Botany Lesson contd.

Evelyn also had another string to her botanical bow. She was an accomplished artist producing drawings and paintings of over 90 of the plant specimens in the herbarium. Botanical illustration plays an important role in the scientific study of plants: hand-drawn illustrations and paintings depict and represent the form, colour, character and details of a plant with sufficient precision and scientific accuracy for it to be recognised and distinguished from another species. Such illustrations thus form an important part of the “associated data” making up the herbarium. Digitised versions of the illustrations are now available to us.

In 1950, the Coryndon herbarium was merged with that of the Amani one to form the East African Herbarium to be housed in the purpose-built building that remains today from whence it has grown and evolved into the rich botanical asset that we have learnt about above.

Sources:

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The Shamba Times, Vol 11 Issue 1, January 2024. A Botany Lesson: Plant Collecting

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Reports on our recent meetings

Visit to Simon Walsh's Gede Nursery

On January 27th, KHS NCD's first monthly meeting in 2026 was a spectacular experience.

We congratulate and thank Simon Walsh and his team for their extremely impressive and extensive preparations for the visit. After enjoying Holly's coffee, biscuits and mandazis and shopping at Maike's well stocked shop, we were briefed by Simon on his bamboo project and his indigenous tree nursery, inspired by his wife, Kirsty, and, to our surprise, their newly opened "Forest School". Simon, Kirsty and 3 month-old Milicia then escorted us along shady, meandering paths, stopping for Simon to point out varieties of bamboo, special trees, the indigenous plant nursery, the charming, tented 'forest school' and their Airbnb tents around a



clearing, where a large pond was being built. At intervals, the route brought us to clearings, where chairs and tables had been set out and coffee and water provided. While we sat comfortably, Simon enthused us with his myriad plans and ideas. His brain is teeming with schemes for these 25 acres. For those of us who visited several years ago, the changes already made are admirable. This delightful visit and guided tour only finished at 1 pm.

On **Saturday 21st February**, more than 40 KHS members met at the Vipingo Beach home and garden of Cherry and Andrew Ritchie.

After our usual welcoming cup of coffee and a natter, and perusal of the KHS pop-up shop, members settled into the wonderful shade of a large pergola, overlooking the ocean, and listened attentively, and amusedly, to an excellent talk given by An-



drew Ritchie, a retired RN Commander, of the many gardens he and his wife Cherry had created and/or managed as they moved from home to home as his navy service dictated. Andrew explained how he and Cherry had originally set-up a new home and garden in Green Park, Naivasha, but hoe by chance they had stumbled across their wonderfully located Vipingo Beach plot and decided to rebuild the house and garden coast. The talk was very well re-ers and was followed by a guided ensive beachfront gardens.



Odds and Ends

Dear Reader,

For those with long memories, you may recall an article in Volume 7 issue 4, October 2020, of The Shamba Times, titled *Ziziphus robertsoniana*. Its author (and NCD honorary life member), Ann Robertson, had been asked to explain how the tree got named after her and, in an iconic image of her standing under the said tree, she looks as if she is doing just that! Ann concludes her piece by pointing out that *Ziziphus robertsoniana* is listed on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species and thus makes an offer: “if you want to save a species, I can supply you with seeds or a seedling!”

And, indeed, very, very recently - at the end of December 2025, we received a request from a reader, not from the North Coast District but from faraway Arusha, Tanzania, who wanted to take up this offer! Dame Heidi Leigh explained that she and her husband had acquired a parcel of land in the Arusha area and were creating a sanctuary for protected species of trees from East Africa and Madagascar (together with an educational centre, the overall project being called The Phoenix House). Having just read about *Ziziphus robertsoniana* in the back copy of our journal, they were very interested in obtaining seeds or a seedling of the tree, an endangered species, and hence needed Ann’s contact details to do so.

These we provided as well as giving Heidi the name of another significant person (and NCD member) to contact: Norbert Rottcher of the Kivukoni Indigenous Tree Nursery in Kilifi. She and her husband have since “discovered” Norbert. A rendezvous has been organised in March when he will go to their sanctuary in the making with a truckload of protected species of trees.

So, KHS NCD wishes Heidi and her husband well in their endeavours: we are pleased that we have played a small part in this regard!

Odds and Ends contd.

Another Way of Living with Nature?

Well, yes! Botanical Printing - also known as Eco Printing - is a slow, sustainable method of imprinting natural elements like leaves, flowers, and bark onto fabric. An Indian company, Kokikar, which makes scarves, silk garments and fashion accessories using such fabric, describes what the method involves.

1. Leaf Selection

It all begins with sourcing. Local leaves are gathered - often from guava, eucalyptus, rose, neem, and marigold plants. These leaves are chosen for their high tannin content, which ensures strong, lasting imprints. Since no two leaves are identical, this step ensures that every scarf or garment is one-of-a-kind.



2. Prepping the Fabric

Plant-based fabrics like cotton, modal, and pure silk are used for their breathability, comfort, and compatibility with natural dyes. These fabrics are pre-mordanted, a process where the fabric is soaked in natural minerals like alum to help absorb the plant pigments. No synthetic additives, ever. This step ensures that the eco-dyed garments are not only safe on the skin but also safe for the planet.

3. Artful Arrangement

Each leaf is hand-placed onto the fabric in compositions that reflect instinct, season, and emotion. Some designs are scattered, others symmetrical. But all are guided by a human hand, not a machine. The result? A design that can never be replicated.

4. Bundling and Steaming

The fabric is then tightly rolled into bundles and steamed over several hours. During this time, heat releases natural pigments from the plant matter. These pigments travel into the fibres, creating delicate, earthy imprints that tell a quiet story of the leaf's shape and age. It is a process that takes time and patience.

5. Revealing the Artwork

The most exciting part is unrolling the bundle. The prints appear like faded watercolours - ghostly, organic, and rich with texture. Some leaves leave copper tones, others greens or charcoal greys. And because they are made with real plants, each eco-printed scarf or hand-printed accessory feels deeply alive.

Odds and Ends contd.

1. Growing With Vinegar



(Image credit: tylim / Getty Images)

One of the easiest ways to get new plants for free is by taking cuttings from existing plants and rooting them with [root stimulating hormone](#). There are commercial [rooting hormones available through places like Amazon](#) or your local garden center, but you can also make your own at home. Willow tea is a popular homemade version, but did you know that you can [use vinegar to help root cuttings and germinate seeds](#)? Dip the end of your cutting into a mixture of apple cider vinegar and water to aid root growth. Soaking seeds in vinegar will weaken the tough seed coat and help your seeds to germinate more quickly.

Diary of upcoming NCD events



25 April 2026. Rewilding your garden for butterflies. Malindi.

We invite members to attend a talk by Africa-renowned entomologist and butterfly guru, Steve Collins. Steve will explain to members the whys and the hows of rewilding all or part of your garden with the specific aim of attracting butterflies into the space. This will be a fascinating talk but one we hope will have practical outcomes for members. To be held at Woburn Residence Club in North Malindi. This is one definitely not be missed.



23 May 2026. The Great Debate, Indigenous vs. Exotic. Watamu.

Following a long running KHS WhatsApp group thread about the merits of planting only indigenous plants, shrubs and trees, against the established practice of filling coastal gardens with exotics of every kind, we offer members a debate in which protagonists of each side of the divide will lay out their case for indigenous or exotic planting, and put it to the members to decide which argument wins the day. The morning should be both stimulating and fun, and we encourage all members to come along and have their say.



27 June 2026. Lungs of the World - Woburn Residence Club in Malindi.

This will be a very special event as full-time artist and lover of nature, Vivien Wallis, talks to Wendy Tayllor about her background and her transition into becoming a full-time painter, now working on a series of paintings of trees, hence the title of the talk, Lungs of the World. There will be an opportunity for members to learn how an artist of nature works, as well as to see samples of Vivien's work. This is one not to be missed.

KHS North Coast District



KENYA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY
Gardening Kenya

North Coast District Contacts

Chairman **Mr Crispin Sharp**
sharpcrispin@hotmail.com

Hon Sec Carissa Nightingale

Hon Treasurer **Mr Rupert Partridge**
rdpartridge@gmail.com

NCD MPESA 0702 767 177

NCD Shop Call Maïke on 0722526187



The KHS North Coast District quarterly newsletter, The Shamba Times, is edited by Wendy Taylor and Carissa Nightingale, with layouts by Crispin Sharp.