A Love Letter to Aloes and Succulents

KHS Mount Kenya Branch Visit to Bob Entwistle's Garden, Timau: 25th October 2025



Some stories begin with laughter even before they start. Five of us, eager and overly excited about the visit, somehow managed to mark our calendars wrong and thought the event was on the **20th of October** instead of the **25th**. If enthusiasm were an aloe, we might have bloomed five days early! By the time the real date finally arrived, anticipation had ripened into a beautiful impatience to learn, see, and feel everything that the day would bring.

And what a morning it was, one that began with promise, the kind that hangs in the cool, damp air after a night of rain. The road to Timau shimmered with that fresh, earthy glow that only semi-arid landscapes know after being kissed by the clouds. The grasses stood taller, greener, and prouder, as though nature herself had pressed a refresh button. In our carpooling convoy, directions were a collective puzzle; we got lost at least once, and the irony wasn't lost on us that the one bravely assisting with directions was also the one battling a hint of carsickness. Yet, through laughter, wrong turns, and fresh air stops, even that became part of the story, the kind of detail that makes a trip more memorable than perfect.

I have always loved aloes and succulents. I keep a few on my balcony, my loyal companions through busy weeks. I call them *"busy millennial plants"* because they ask for so little: a sip of water now and then, a bit of sunlight, and the courtesy of being left alone to thrive. So when I heard of a talk themed *"How to Love Your Aloes and Succulents"*, curiosity tugged at me. What more could love demand from something so self-sufficient?

By the time we arrived at Bob Entwistle's garden in Timau, the turnout was wonderful, proof that I wasn't the only one enchanted by these quiet beauties. The air was cool, the sky gentle, and the garden promised stories written in stone and leaf. After warming ourselves with coffee and cookies, our minds were ready for nourishment of a different kind.



Bob stood before us, soft-spoken yet remarkably engaging; his words carried the unmistakable weight of passion. What began as a simple hobby three decades ago had blossomed into a lifelong devotion. For thirty years, he has collected, nurtured, and protected succulents, creating a living sanctuary of over a hundred varieties, some native, others from as far as Namibia and Tanzania. His garden is not just a collection; it is a chronicle of patience and love.



What struck me most was learning that succulents, those resilient guardians of the desert, are now themselves at risk. Some species face extinction due to poaching, driven by the rising demand for medicinal plants and the ornamental trade. Bob spoke of this soberly, his words carrying both warning and hope. He is part of a quiet but vital movement to conserve endangered succulents, ensuring that beauty and biodiversity endure beyond our generation.

He explained how these hardy plants have mastered survival through a remarkable system called Crassulacean Acid Metabolism (CAM). This special photosynthetic pathway allows them to conserve water by opening their stomata at night, sipping carbon dioxide while the world sleeps. In the dry, wind-swept hills of Timau, this gift makes them both efficient and poetic, breathing when others rest, thriving where others wilt.

Bob's garden mirrors this wisdom. The rocks around his home create perfect aeration and drainage; the wind breaks are positioned just so. He uses grass cuttings as compost, proving that even the simplest garden waste can feed life again. As we walked through, every bed of aloes and succulents felt thoughtfully composed, a delicate dance between colour, form, and texture. Flowers of coral and gold punctuated the silvery greens, painting the garden with subtle bursts of warmth.







Later, as three of us were chatting about the talk, one member admitted with a grin, “Those scientific names, they go in one ear and out the other!” We all laughed and agreed that perhaps there should be *friendlier* names for these beautiful plants, something like *“succulent green with red flowers.”* It was a moment of shared amusement, proof that even as we learn, we can still laugh at our own limitations.

For me, the visit was both humbling and inspiring. I had come thinking succulents were the lazy gardener’s best friend, low-maintenance, forgiving, a plant that asks for little. But I left realising that love, even for the hardiest of plants, still means attention, care, and understanding. They, too, need nutrients, aeration, and protection. Their resilience is not an excuse for neglect but a lesson in quiet strength.







Before the garden walk, I had the honour of gifting Bob a book titled *"Fruits and Seeds."* It felt fitting, a small token of gratitude to someone who has spent a lifetime nurturing growth. I wished, silently, that every seed in his garden would bear fruit, both literally and metaphorically.



As if nature was listening, the skies soon opened. The rain came softly at first, then in generous waves, sending us hurrying to the patio where Bob, ever undeterred, continued his talk while the garden shimmered behind him. There was something poetic about that moment, a man teaching about plants that love arid lands, while rain, the symbol of life itself, blessed his garden.

When we finally left for lunch, our shoes were muddy, our spirits light, and our hearts full. What began as curiosity became a renewed appreciation for the quiet guardians of the desert, for their patience, their poetry, and their enduring grace.

The Timau breeze carried us home, and I couldn't help but smile at the thought: perhaps loving your succulents is not so different from loving life itself, to give gently, observe closely, and let beauty unfold at its own pace.

Fun Facts: Aloes and Succulents in Kenya

- Kenya is home to **over 60 species of aloes**, with nearly half of them **endemic** — found nowhere else on Earth.
- The **Aloe secundiflora**, with its tall red flower spikes, is one of the most widespread species in Kenya.
- Many Kenyan aloes are used in **traditional medicine**, for skincare, and even as natural fencing plants.
- Succulents use **CAM photosynthesis**, allowing them to thrive in dry climates by opening their pores only at night — a remarkable adaptation for water conservation.
- Sadly, **illegal collection and habitat loss** threaten several native species, making conservation gardens like Bob's an invaluable refuge for Kenya's botanical heritage.

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