

BY DEBRA PRINZING

Botanical Influences

A South African childhood inspires one Harlem, New York-based florist to use her heritage as a brand distinctive.

Details: Cape Lily: capelily.com, @capelily

Photography by Frances Janisch
Dress: Polyhymnia by Kosibah, kosibah.com
Model: Lilas Kodjo



The Latin name for a Cape lily flower is *Crinum X porwellii*, the result of a cross between two South African crinum lilies, developed in the 19th century by English plant breeders.

Cape Lily is also the name of a Harlem, N.Y.-based floral design studio founded in 2016 by South African transplant **Sylvia Lukach**. Raised in Plettenberg Bay, a remote coastal region of the country called the “Garden Route,” Sylvia loved following her florist-mother and landscaper-father around the country’s wild Fynbos landscape. Her parents supported Sylvia and her sister as year-round residents of an area where the wealthy from Johannesburg vacationed during holidays. “I kind of joke and say it’s the Hamptons of South Africa,” she explains.

Sylvia learned floristry from her mother, picking from the family’s garden and from her grandmother’s garden next door, to design with Inca lilies, Cape lilies, Proteas, roses and sweet peas, among other blooms.

“My mum was the first florist in our tiny town. She did that out of necessity...but also out of a love of flowers that comes from generations of people growing flowers and farming. I, too, loved it from an early age, following my mum to the bush as she picked whatever she needed. I would just mimic whatever she was doing,” Sylvia recalls.

“Foraging” was not a familiar term at the time, but beyond using her cultivated gardens, that’s essentially how Sylvia’s mother sourced design ingredients. “You can walk along the coast here for miles and miles...there’s lots of vegetation and indigenous South African flora,” the designer says. “Winter’s the best time to find *Leucadendron* and Erica, Protea and grasses. Fynbos territory is known as one of the most diverse plant families, and for having some of

the highest concentrations of endemic species in the world.”

Sylvia is a white, English-speaking South African, and thus, her heritage isn’t always obvious until you hear her lovely accent and see her vivid floral designs. In an age where creatives in many professions yearn to develop a distinctive point of view, a style or a brand unique only to them, Sylvia’s embrace of beloved South African flora has helped her articulate what makes her different as a designer.



Yet, for years, Sylvia was convinced that floristry as a career would be “hard work,” choosing instead to study politics, philosophy and economics at the University of Cape Town. For a decade after university, she lived in Paris, then London, and then New York, working as a management consultant on information technology infrastructure projects. She would occasionally handle wedding flowers for family or friends, treating design like tennis, another childhood hobby that she loved.

In 2015, as Sylvia was readying for her forthcoming wedding, her mother died. “I think that’s the first time I ever picked up Instagram and started looking at flowers,” she recalls. “And suddenly, everything for me became focused on flowers, from doing the flowers for her funeral to planning for the wedding flowers.”

Sylvia wanted only indigenous South African flowers for her ceremony. “Every table at the reception featured a different species and flower, and I wrote about the botanical history of each -- like a curated art display.”

Using South African flowers as a way to handle

grief actually opened the door to finally saying “yes” to floral design as a profession. “I was like a woman on a mission,” Sylvia confides. Once she made the decision to put management consulting behind her, she began to realize that “every moment in my life, thus far, has brought me to this point.”

Having watched her mother rely on a narrow, seasonal and truly local palette of botanicals (and the occasional box of flowers delivered more than 1,000 miles by bus from a wholesaler in Johannesburg), Sylvia is comfortable with the “natural constraint” of sourcing from a single flower farm.

“That is my preferred way to design. I like to go to one farm and use what they are harvesting at any given time. I find that’s easier than having a selection of everything in the world.”

She often sources from flower farmer **Angela DeFelice of Rock Steady Farm & Flowers**, based in Millerton, N.Y., in the Hudson Valley. Because the farm delivers to numerous designers and shops in Brooklyn, Sylvia is able to pre-order flowers and coordinate in-city pickup from Rock Steady Farm.

During the past two years, Cape Lily’s business model has evolved from selling bouquets at a local farmers’ market to business subscriptions and pop-up stores to now, primarily wedding florals. The transplanted South African and her American husband sought out Harlem as a place to live and base Cape Lily’s studio business. Finding South African flowers from wholesalers in New York’s flower district isn’t impossible, but Sylvia has fully embraced the practice of sourcing local, seasonal and American-grown flowers.

“Having a floral aesthetic that looks somewhat African coming from my studio in Harlem is my differentiator. I bring a fresh design aesthetic, I use a lot of texture and bright colors, I incorporate things like seeds and feathers in subtle ways,” she says. Sylvia calls her floral design style “Afro-botanical,” explaining that the rustic, yet modern aesthetic relies on plants, roots, bright colors, color blocking, even patterned African-made textiles.

“It’s just what I love and it’s what I always come back to,” she says. “I really think the people who are successful in this world are people who are very specific. You may not like their look, but they definitely have a look. My goal is to be a unique, contemporary African-style florist in Harlem. I want to embrace my heritage. The vibe is more experimental and different from traditional, mainstream influences.”



Dress, skirt and earrings: Royal Jelly Harlem, royaljellyharlem.com
Necklace, accessories and necklace: Africa Boutik, africaboutik.us
Model: Sofia Mvokany



Touring South Africa’s Botanical Landscape

Sylvia Lukach has added destination workshop host and travel guide to her menu of services with **Cape Lily’s** March 12-21, 2018, botanical retreat designed specifically for floral professionals and flower lovers. The tour includes a three-day floral design workshop led by **Susan McLeary** of **Passionflower** and a master class with South African-based floral designer **Daniel Ferreira** of **Ecozest**, as well as a Big Five safari, botanical tourism and cultural immersion.

For more details and last-minute offers see: capelily.com.

“I’m super passionate about showing people South Africa, whether it’s through flowers or travel. I genuinely believe that it’s one of the most special places on earth and that everyone should see and feel what it’s like, at least once in a lifetime,” Sylvia says. ■