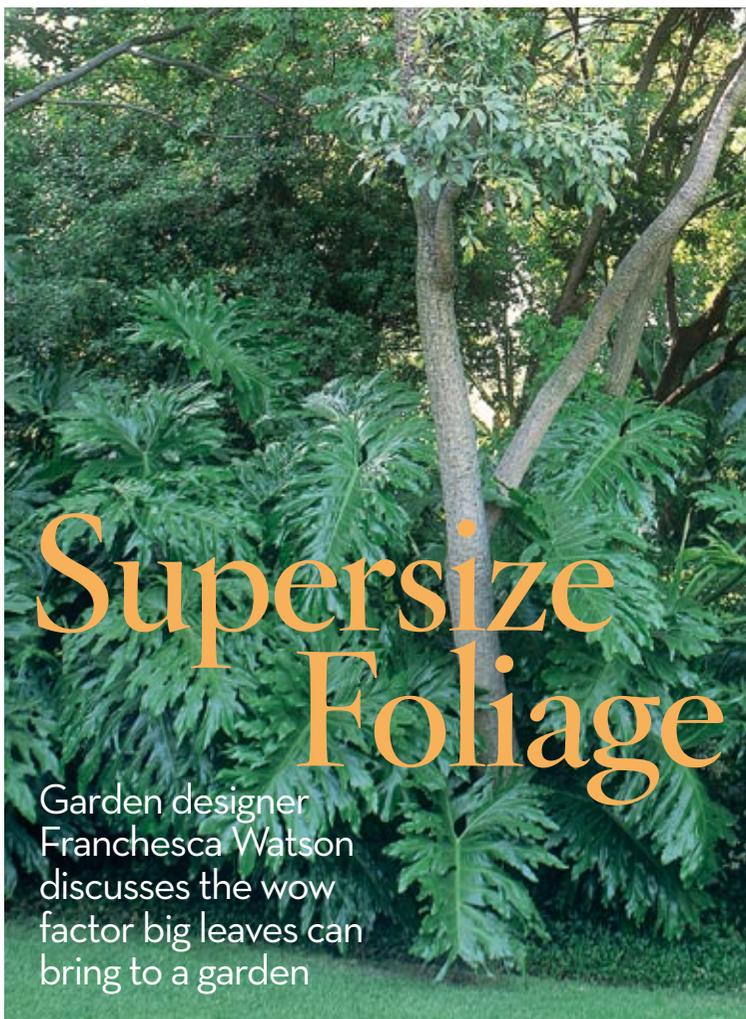




THIS IS A PIECE I HAVE been wanting to write for a while, indeed ever since I was commissioned to design the planting for the Oyster Box Hotel in Umhlanga Rocks (presently undergoing a major face-lift and about to be fabulous again).

Bold, lush and unafraid, big graphic leaves are right back in fashion – both inside and outside the home. There’s a new mood for leaf texture, no fiddly fuss, just simple, heavingly large, healthy and fun foliage, so move over fynbos! Here is a selection of my favourites.



Supersize Foliage

Garden designer Franchesca Watson discusses the wow factor big leaves can bring to a garden

EASY-TO-GROW FLORA THAT WILL PROSPER IN SUBTROPICAL PARTS OF THE COUNTRY

- **ANTHURIUM CRYSTALLINUM** The most special member of the Anthurium genus, this one has dark velvety bottle-green leaves with prominent pale veins.
- **FICUS LYRATA** This large-leafed fig tree is from central and western Africa. You’ll recognise it from international decor magazines, with its chunky waxy wavy-edged leaves

- on stocky stems. With just the right combination of tropical green and strong form, it’s right on trend.
- **STENOCHLAENA TENUIFOLIA** A very large-fronded terrestrial fern with gorgeous molasses-coloured hairy creeping stems. It’s indigenous but very strong and therefore best massed in large plantings. I’ve seen it

- totally concealing shady block walls in KwaZulu-Natal and looking marvellous.
- **MONSTERA DELICIOSA** Known as delicious monster to the child within us all, this vigorous climber can cover whole walls or trees with its giant profusion, each leaf turned perfectly to the light to best display its shape.

THESE BOLD SPECIMENS GROW ALMOST EVERYWHERE, EXCEPT IN FROST-PRONE REGIONS

- **MAGNOLIAS** My favourite is the evergreen-tree *Magnolia grandiflora* and in smaller gardens, *Magnolia* ‘Little Gem’. Darkest-of-dark glossy leaves with bronze undersides adorn these trees and I use them in arrangements all year round. They are fabulous in the garden as specimens or background shrubs. Nothing beats them.
- **ELEPHANT EARS** This handsome favourite is back in fashion. Many varieties are available, from black through to green and glossy burgundy. The colloquial term elephant ear seems to cover both genus *Alocasia* and *Colocasia* and they are generally hardy plants, which given the correct position in the garden, will perform well and give the wonderful bold lush effect required.
- **AGAVE ATTENUATA** There is nothing quite like this agave – it has a pale, slightly grey-green colour and a perfect rosette of pointy leaves but no thorns. Great massed in the garden and doubly great in pots.
- **FICUS CARICA** An edible fig, this

- plant easily introduces a tropical texture to those gardens in the Western Cape where 100-per-cent tropical plants will not grow. The leaves fascinate me – all have the same basic shape but vary incredibly from tree to tree. While some are almost round and others deeply dentate, all are beautiful.
- **ARUMS** Possible to cultivate in most gardens in South Africa, except for really dry regions, there are some fabulous varieties, including the ‘Green Goddess’ and the new one with white-veined leaves. The arum is probably the most elegant plant on the planet and proudly South African.
- **FRANGIPANIS** This is an it plant at present. Prospering in various regions, it has a chunky characterful branching habit, romantic scented flowers and great bunches of big leaves. I can never understand people who don’t want them because their leaves may fall into the pool – they are large and therefore so easy to remove.

THESE BIG-LEAVED PLANTS CAN ONLY BE GROWN IN TRULY TROPICAL AREAS

- **MEDINILLA MAGNIFICA** This is a breathtaking plant, pale veined, leathery leaved and full of character with a sense of strangeness. The great dangling luscious-pink blooms will blow you away.
- **STAGHORN FERN** Instantly recognised by its mound of trunk-clinging antler-shaped leaves, you’ll often find this fern stuck to trees. The best for some implausible drama, these are borderline kitsch but in the right situation they are absolutely marvellous.
- **LOTUS** An Indian water lily, Lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*) is what dreams are made of. It has large roundish pale leaves borne way above the water on wavy stems. Accompanied, when well established, by the achingly beautiful pink blooms well known in Buddhist mythology, the flowers are followed by the famous seed heads.
- **HELICONIAS** Only for the truly tropical or subtropical garden, this plant has kaleidoscopic gems for flowers and huge boat-shaped leaves, like elegant bananas. The best varieties grow to over man-size.
- **PHILODENDRON SELLOUM** This old favourite is back in a big way and making its appearance in the chicest gardens. Nothing is better than a pathway lined with these towering beauties that raise themselves up on their prehistoric roots to above head height. There are also a number of new varieties, like *Philodendron* ‘Rojo Congo’, which has smaller fuller burgundy-coloured leaves.