



What is it About Avenues?

Landscape designer Franchesca Watson explores the beauty and practicality of creating avenues of trees



Stinkwood – all wonderful trees that make great avenues. My favourites, however, are more unusual and require confidence to plant and vision to know how they will develop. The best I ever saw was a long farm driveway in the Northern Province planted with Baobabs – talk about a big future vision by someone’s great grandfather! I have also seen a great avenue of Waterberries (*Syzygium cordatum*), which was wonderful in that each tree had its own character and shape and the beautiful chunky branches met overhead – a totally African avenue. I am mad about the Outeniqua yellowwood (*Podocarpus falcatus*) as a tree and use it often in many different ways, but never

as an avenue, as I feel it would be too dark and depressing. However, that said, I had the most amazing yellowwood experience the other day. I turned into the

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Boschendal Estate driveway and, planted along the historical road that ends with Cecil John Rhodes’ original farm cottage, is a mixed avenue of *Podocarpus henkelii* and *Podocarpus elongatus* – both of which I used to think of as smallish, stumpy yellowwoods. They are planted fairly close to each other and touch at their sides so that they shut out the views of the farm. They also have pleasing pyramidal shapes. The slightly differing textures create interest and the trees have developed that lovely older gnarled look and feel. But the pièce de résistance is the Simonsberg mountains towering ahead, framed by the neat dark trees. The whole composition is jaw-dropping.

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The word ‘avenue’ is taken from its French source ‘venir’, meaning ‘to come’, indicating the coming to or arrival at a spot. An avenue of trees lining a driveway or path has over the centuries become one of the most popular devices in the design of gardens. Traditionally straight, the avenue (or allée) is usually planted with trees all of the same variety, giving a uniform appearance.

What makes avenues so desirable? When creating large-ish gardens I am routinely asked to plant an avenue of trees along the driveway. But why does this device strike such a chord the world over? It has something to do with grandness – the luxury of having all that space to plant so many trees and the time it takes during one’s approach down the avenue to comprehend just how big the property is. That said, there is great familiarity and tradition in

an avenue driveway. The rhythm of the trees is soothing, almost musical as one drives or walks along. The experience of the vanishing point of the avenue framing something at the end – a house or a view which slowly gets bigger – is entrancing. If the trees are mature, there is a chance that their canopies touch each other over the driveway, adding a sense of coolness and protection. And if the trees are very closely spaced, one can experience the driveway as a shady tunnel which explodes into light at the other end. Closely spaced trees will also grow taller quicker as they stretch for light. Conversely, if widely spaced along the driveway, one can see portions of the property as one proceeds – each glimpse framed by a pair of trees.

The choice of trees is important. There are a number of usual suspects such as London Plane, Liquidambar or White