

The Thinking Garden



An inspiring story about South African women sowing the seeds of change

SYNOPSIS

In the dying days of apartheid, three generations of women in a village in South Africa came together to create a community garden. They called it “the thinking garden” – *hleketani* in the local xiTsonga language – a place where women gather to think about how to effect change. Twenty-five years later the garden is still going strong, providing fresh vegetables and new opportunities for local people while helping to confront the ravages of climate change, poverty, and HIV/AIDS in a community pushed to the edge. Beautifully filmed against the backdrop of an epic drought, *The Thinking Garden* tells the uplifting story of what can happen when older women take matters into their own hands, and how local action in food production can give even the most vulnerable people a measure of control over their food and their futures.

35 minutes; xiTsonga with English subtitles (also available with French, German, or Arabic subtitles)

“ A lovely film, rich with song and thought. Weaving the story of the garden with the bigger picture ... renders the triumph of the women all the more important. ”

Raj Patel, scholar, filmmaker, author of *Stuffed and Starved* and *Seven Cheap things*

Film link: www.womensfarm.org/the-film/ or www.fourstoriesaboutfood.org/video-gallery/

AWARDS TO DATE

- *Matrix Award winner and Official Selection, Vancouver International Women in Film Festival, March 2017
- *Official Selection, Paris Lesbian and Feminist Film Festival, Nov. 2017 (French subtitles)
- *Official Selection, Jozi Film Festival (Johannesburg), Sept. 2017
- *Official Selection, Kuala Lumpur Eco Film Festival, Oct. 2017
- *Official Selection, Toronto African Film and Music Festival, Nov. 2017
- *Official Selection, Frankfurt, Globale Mittelhessen Festival, Jan. 2018 (German subtitles)
- *Official Selection, Antigonish International Film Festival, Oct. 2017
- *Official Selection, Vancouver South African Film Festival, Apr. 2017
- *Official Selection, ReFrame Film Festival, Peterborough, Jan. 2018
- *Official Selection, Cinema Verde International Environmental Film Festival, Florida, Feb. 2018
- *Canadian Selection, UN Women Film Festival, Amman, Jordan, March 2018 (including community screenings with Arabic subtitles)
- *Semi-Finalist, Green Earth Film Festival, Los Angeles, 2018
- *Official Selection, Globale Filmfestival Erfurt, Germany, Oct. 2018
- *Official Selection, Globale Filmfestival Berlin, Germany, Oct. 2018 (German subtitles)
- *Official Selection, Salt Spring Film Festival, Canada, March 2019
- *Selection, Pedagogical Section, Festival Alimenterre, Belgium, June 2019

SHORT SYNOPSIS

A film about South African women sowing the seeds of change in the context of poverty, climate change, and HIV/AIDS.

35 minutes; xiTsonga with English subtitles

(also available with French, German, or Arabic subtitles)

PRODUCTION TEAM (Canada)

Directed by **Christine Welsh**

Written and Produced by **Elizabeth Vibert** and **Christine Welsh**

Cinematography and Editing by **Moira Simpson**

Assistant Director **Basani Ngobeni (South Africa)**

Music by **Bruce Ruddell**

Sound Design and Mix by **Chris McLaren, Sound Kitchen Studios**

Colourist **Rob Neilson**

Produced with Assistance from the British Columbia Arts Council

Additional Funding Provided by the University of Victoria and Indiegogo Crowdfunding

Produced in Association with Prairie Girl Films

Filmed on Location in Jopi Village and N'wamitwa, Limpopo Province, South Africa

Distributed by Moving Images Distribution

www.movingimages.ca

For more information:

www.facebook.com/sathinkinggarden and womensfarm.org

CONTACTS

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REVIEWS

*“ Speaks to the essence and significance
of **Food Sovereign communities.** ”*

Bellise Omondi, Food Sovereignty Campaign, South Africa

*“ The **remarkable story** of this community
garden and the women who brought it
to life **will inspire countless others.** ”*

Ethnobotanist Nancy Turner

*“ **This is a film for Africa** – African
governments should see this film. ”*

Ida Makuka, Zambia

*“ **Magnificent and inspirational.** ”*

Anthropologist Julie Cruikshank

*“ I feel **reverence.**”*

*“ **Passionate.**”*

*“ It’s amazing to me how
we come to know the women.”*

Team biographies below

Christine Welsh is an award-winning Metis filmmaker whose films have been described as “gentle conversations about not so gentle things.” She began work in the film industry as an assistant editor on Allan King’s prairie classic *Who Has Seen the Wind* and worked as a film editor in Toronto for ten years before relocating to the West Coast in 1989. As a writer and director, her films explore hidden histories – her own (*Women in the Shadows*) and that of others (*Kuper Island: Return to the Healing Circle*). *Finding Dawn* (NFB, 2006) was an early call to action on the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada, while *Keepers of the Fire* celebrates the role of Indigenous women in keeping their cultures alive and fighting for human rights. The tenacity of the human spirit and the importance of individual action in keeping hope alive are endemic to her work and were the things that drew her to the story of *The Thinking Garden*.

Elizabeth Vibert is an historian and writer whose work focuses on food insecurity and aspirations for food sovereignty in the era of climate crisis, and in the context of poverty and gender and colonial inequities. For nearly a decade she has done oral history research with a group of older women at Hleketani Community Garden, a co-operative vegetable farm in South Africa, and she is the author of articles and a planned book exploring the life histories of women under apartheid and democracy. Elizabeth’s current research project examines community-level initiatives to create socially just and ecologically sustainable food systems in four contexts: rural and urban South Africa; resource-poor refugee and urban communities in Jordan; and Indigenous communities in Colombia and coastal Canada. She teaches history at the University of Victoria and directed UVic’s Colonial Legacies Field School in South Africa.

Moira Simpson has over thirty years experience as an award-winning freelance director, cinematographer and editor. Her work in film, video and new media has always been informed by a passionate belief that film can be a powerful impetus for social justice. Work on NFB and independent projects has taken her to Kosovo, several African countries, and Peru. Mo has mentored many young filmmakers, teaching workshops across Canada and in the Arctic and teaching film production at UBC, SFU, and Emily Carr University. An unfamiliar language, xiTsonga, provided new challenges in *The Thinking Garden*.

Basani Ngobeni, who comes from a village near The Thinking Garden, is currently studying media and communications at Boston City Campus, Pretoria, and hopes to specialize in filmmaking. This is her first film credit – she served as assistant director on *The Thinking Garden*. Basani’s roots in the area, her exceptional language and cultural interpretation skills, and her facilitation and organizational skills were fundamentally important to the making of this film. Basani also provided all the translations from xiTsonga to English for the film subtitles.

HOW IT CAME TOGETHER

Notes on *The Thinking Garden* from Director Christine Welsh

My involvement in *The Thinking Garden* began with an invitation from historian Elizabeth Vibert, who has spent several years conducting oral history research with the farmers at Hleketani Community Garden. In response to their frequent query, “Are you going to make a film about us, too?,” Liz approached me to see if I’d be interested in such a project. I immediately said yes, and within weeks Liz had launched a successful Indiegogo crowdfunding campaign that would eventually take us to film in South Africa.

I saw in the story of “the thinking garden” many parallels to the work I’ve done over the past thirty years, documenting on film the historical and contemporary experiences of Indigenous women in Canada. My previous films have told stories of ordinary women doing extraordinary things – “unsung heroines” who have overcome monumental challenges and obstacles to create change. *The Thinking Garden* is just such a story. In a place marked by persistent inequality and poverty, the farmers of Hleketani Community Garden have drawn on remarkable reserves of strength, courage and resilience to do something radical. Their story provides yet another answer to the question that has driven so much of my work – *What does hope look like?*

As an Indigenous woman from Canada, I found the experience of filming *The Thinking Garden* in South Africa both familiar and destabilizing. I recognized the legacies of colonialism, but I knew little about the local context and I didn’t speak the language. Fortunately I was blessed with collaborators who more than rose to the challenges. Liz’s knowledge of South Africa, and the close relationships of trust and reciprocity she’s built over years of working with the farmers, ensured we had the kind of access that would allow us to create an intimate, sensitive and informed film portrait. Our cinematographer, Moira Simpson, drew on more than three decades of experience working in marginalized communities around the world to create unforgettable images of the women and their farm. Mo then spent months editing the film and confronting its most daunting challenge: working with a story recorded entirely in the xiTsonga language. Enter our very gifted interpreter, Basani Ngobeni, who was fundamental to our ability to speak with and film the farmers and who travelled to Canada during post-production to painstakingly translate hours of filmed interviews. Without Basani there would be no film. She is credited as Assistant Director.

A year after we completed filming in South Africa, Liz travelled back to the village to show the farmers a fine cut of the film. “It’s like a miracle,” Rosina Masangu told her. “I never dreamed we would see something like this for our farm.” For me, the miracle is that, despite all the opportunities we had to get it wrong, we managed to get it mostly right. And that is due in no small measure to the boundless patience, humour, and generosity of the farmers of Hleketani Community Garden.