



The Merlin Trust

2nd Year Trainee Attendance at the Mediterranean Gardening Association Portugal Pre-Conference Tour

Report by Jennifer Wright

Merlin 755

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View of the beach from the hotel at Armacão de Pera.

Introduction

First of all, I believe I should introduce myself. My name is Jennifer and I am a 2nd year Professional Gardener's Guild (PGG) trainee at the Garden House, Devon. I spent my first-year placement at Waddesdon Manor, Buckinghamshire. Waddesdon Manor is a beautiful Victorian French renaissance style chateau in the middle of the English countryside with huge amounts of vibrant annual bedding. The Garden House is a small 9-acre site with a focus on naturalistic style plantings. The contrast is stark and actually completely wonderful. Prior to starting with the PGG I spent 2 years at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh as a modern apprentice learning about botanical horticulture. As part of the PGG training scheme, myself and 3 other trainees took a trip to Portugal. This included the attendance of the Pre-Conference Tour at the Algarve hosted by the Mediterranean Gardening Association Portugal. I would like to thank the Merlin Trust for the funding I was awarded which went towards supporting the cost of the tour, accommodation and travel. This trip was aimed to improve our knowledge and understanding of Mediterranean plants and biodiversity and I believe this goal was achieved.



Prickly Pear (*Opuntia* sp.), Barrocal Botanic Garden

31/03/19

We had the excellent opportunity to work with Rosie and Rob Peddle at the Barrocal Botanic Garden prior to the start of the pre-conference tour. This was organised by Rosie who is a founding member of the Mediterranean Gardening Association Portugal. In the morning, we were met at the hotel by Rosie and Rob who treated us to coffee in the hotel bar, they used this time to give us an explanation of what their plans for the botanical garden were in the beginning and how they see themselves progressing in the future. Rosie gave us insight into invasive plant species which have become part of the landscape in the Algarve for example, *Carpobrotus edulis*, and invasive pests such as the Red Palm Weevil, *Rhynchophorus ferrugineus*. This brief talk prepared us for the day ahead.

After a short taxi ride from the hotel, passing Silves, we were dropped off at the entrance of the 2-hectare site. The garden is located at the top of a hill which is accessed by a track wide enough for single car. The 2 hectares which is home to the botanic garden is also the site of an almond nuttury, an exotic fruit garden and a veggie patch. After collecting tools, including the Portuguese enxada which is a cross between a spade and a mattock, we took a slow walk from tool store to the garden itself. Rosie pointed out many native wildflowers on the way such as the Mirror Orchid and the Star Clover which are pictured below. This began the theme for the day, the Barrocal Botanic Garden itself features many native and naturalised plants on the Algarve. Rosie explained to us that the botanic garden aims to demonstrate the uses of native and other Mediterranean plants to both professionals and amateurs alike, focussing on the benefits that they can give us such as biodiversity, fire resistance and drought tolerant plantings. The mission statement of the garden is as follows: *"To promote Mediterranean plants and gardens, through education, culture, conservation and recognition of their community, environmental and economic importance in our everyday lives."* Rosie described the Algarve as being a biodiversity hotspot which is split into 3 general localities, the *litoral*, the *barrocal* and the *serra*. The *litoral* is the lowest level by the coast, the *barrocal* literally meaning clay and chalk covers the hills and middle section and the *serra* refers to the top mountainous region.

The tour continued on and we passed Prickly Pear (*Opuntia*) and as it had ripe fruit, at Rosie's suggestion, we cut one open tried a small portion each. It was surprisingly tasty! It had a similar texture to a melon but tasted somewhat like a passionfruit. *Opuntia* is a native of America and therefore not native to

the Algarve. Unfortunately, the Prickly Pear is at home in Portugal and has naturalised in many areas of the Mediterranean, becoming invasive in some places. We arrived at the garden soon after. Many of the plantings are young as the garden itself began in 2016, first with a survey of all existing plants and then later planting of native species which were not already represented in the garden. Rosie and Rob showed us around the garden introducing us to Grandpa, the oldest olive tree in the garden, and Grandma, the oldest carob tree at the opposite end of the garden. Carob trees, *Ceratonia siliqua*, olive trees, *Olea europaea*, in addition to almond trees, *Prunus dulcis*, have an ancient and traditional agricultural history in Portugal.

Our task of the day was to water and mulch all the newly planted shrubs and trees. These shrubs were indicated by either black pots filled with stones next to them or a ring of stones and shallow bowl around the base of the plants. In the garden, they water the ground very infrequently in the summer, around once a month, and then they only water newly planted plants. This shallow bowl traps the water in the area and allows the water to drain deep down to the roots of the plant. Watering only when completely necessary encourages the roots to travel further into the ground to look for water there which in the summer droughts stands them in better stead to survive the soaring temperatures. This method of watering works very well for the native species in the garden as this is more environmentally natural for the area and reduces water use in areas prone to drought. I have previously been taught about this method but it was extremely interesting to see it put into practice in area where water efficiency is very important. Each plant was then mulched to improve water retention and any remaining mulch was spread on the beds near the paths. The mulch is shredded material from the garden. No compost waste leaves the site and everything is reused. At the end of the day, we walked briskly back to the tool store with a enough time to grab a quick cup of tea before travelling back to the hotel in a taxi.



Ophrys speculum or Mirror Orchid



Anacamptis pyramidalis or Pyramidal Orchid



Trifolium stellatum or Star Clover



Anthyllis tetraphylla or Bladder Vetch

01/04/19

The pre-conference began in the evening with pre-dinner drinks and a buffet meal. This was a great way to introduce ourselves to everyone in the group. The group was diverse with people coming from all over the world including South Africa, the U.S.A, Chile and other parts of Europe.

02/04/19

In the morning we all gathered in the hotel lobby and made our way to the minibuses. Tuesday's part of the tour was guided by Marylin Medina Ribeiro who works as a landscape designer in the Algarve. Our first stop of the day was to Quinta do Lago, here Marilyn has worked with the property owners to create a designed space that uses native and Mediterranean plants. The use of Mediterranean plants in this garden was to cut down on expensive water bills by replacing grass lawns with drought tolerant plants. Marilyn explained that her use of an inorganic mulch such as gravel was to avoid excess humidity which many silver leaved Mediterranean plants hate. Marilyn recommends not fertilising areas like these where possible, as new lush growth does not cope well with summer drought. As you can imagine, summer drought is a severe problem in parts of Portugal, Marilyn told us how meeting Rosie Peddle from the Barrocal botanic garden very early on after moving to Portugal had been a life saver. Rosie explained that our winter is equivalent to the Portuguese summer. If you think of it like that, then it's much harder to go wrong. The summer in Portugal is very hot and therefore plants choose not to grow at that time of year where possible, so the growing season for them is winter when it is cooler and wetter. So, anything that needs huge amounts of water in high temperatures isn't going to cope well with the environment in the Algarve.

Stop number two was to a rural haven and sustainability farm near Vale da Lama. This estate has 42 hectares of land used for sustainable living and education and is home to a vegetarian restaurant and an orchard. It has a focus on regenerative planting and permaculture. After a brief talk by one of the owners we learned that the farm was created with the philosophy of putting the planet first and educating people on the importance of sustainable organic living. The farm uses bio fertilisers such as nettles which are collected from the property and turned into a soup that then feeds the soil. In areas such as the orchard,

woody waste from olive and almond agricultural production is used as a mulch to boost the mycorrhizal network in the soil. From there, we went on a tour of the grounds going between ornamental gardens near buildings and wilder areas created for the encouragement of wildlife. As the tour around the grounds progressed Marilyn brought us to the areas which she had the most influence upon, these areas were planted with Mediterranean plants that can withstand drought.



Marilyn showing the choice of plants at the 2nd location Planting with callistemon and aloes at *Quinta do Lago*.

As the tour of the grounds came to an end, we all bundled back on to the minibuses and headed to Monchique mountain. There we began the afternoon with a leisurely lunch at Luar da Foia which served the most delicious black pork I have tasted in my life. With the addition of the morning's activities, lunch was abuzz with conversation about the gardens. It also gave us the opportunity talk a bit more about our fields of work and where we came from now that first evening jitters had passed. Following lunch, we walked from the restaurant to the last garden of the day passing *Lathyrus latifolius* and *Quercus suber*. *Quercus suber* or the Cork Oak was a common sight throughout our stay in Portugal. We learned that Cork Oak is the national tree of Portugal. The bark from a Cork Oak is harvested every 7-9 years to where the branches split apart. It can only be harvested on the hottest days of the year so that the cork comes away without damaging the cambium of the tree. The cork is then used at home and exported internationally where it is used for bottle tops, flooring and bags.

The garden in Monchique was built up at the back with terracing, traditional for Monchique as a method for reducing water usage and conserving what was used. The area around the house was the most modern part of the garden and had been created with the help of Marilyn, the planting was inspired by Olivier Filippi, a renowned ecologist and nurseryman specializing in drought tolerant plantings. As the last part of the day we drove right to the top of Monchique mountain spotting *Paeonia mascula* on the way. This Peony is a rare sight and caused quite a stir of excitement on the buses. At the top of Monchique, we stopped to see the dreaded *Rhododendron ponticum* which is so rare there but such a menace back home in the U.K before heading back down the mountain and to the hotel.



Lathyrus latifolius or the Everlasting Pea



Quercus suber or Cork Oak.

03/04/19



Cytinus hypocistis growing on the coast near *Cistus palhinhae*

The second day of the pre-conference tour started with a trip to Carrascalhino, Aljezur where we met up with our guides of the day Claudia and Udo Schwarzer. Claudia and Udo run a successful business designing and building environmentally friendly biological swimming pools. These pools filter water through

the use of plants and their clever design creates a home for insects and other animals as well. Upon meeting our guides, they took us on a tour of the native forest development around their home. This area was originally forested but this was all removed when *Eucalyptus* plantations became all the rage. Since then, the ownership of the land has changed and the current owner has commissioned Claudia and Udo to manage the area. They have worked for over a decade to remove non-native *Eucalyptus* and *Acacia* from the site. *Eucalyptus* stumps were removed to prevent regrowth and the native *Quercus suber* seedlings found were marked and protected from the removal process. At the beginning of the project 29 plant species were recorded in the forest and since then they have seen a phenomenal explosion of biodiversity with over 320 species recorded in the last year. Animal and fungi species have also seen a dramatic rise with owls and wild boar returning to the area. For now, *Arbutus unedo* or the strawberry tree is the main canopy tree in the forest but as the forest develops the canopy will be replaced with *Quercus* species and the *Arbutus* will be pushed to the edges of the woodland where it would naturally grow. At the end of the tour we left our guides to head for lunch.

After a seafood lunch, Claudia and Udo re-joined the group and Marilyn arrived for the afternoon as well. Udo led us along the coast covering part of Rota Vicentina stopping briefly to talk about native plants which we had not seen that morning. This included the parasitic plant *Cytinus hypocistis* which parasitizes off of *Cistus palhinhae* which is endemic to the region and under threat from habitat loss. *Armeria maritima* was dotted along the coastal paths. Native to this region, it is popular back home as a gravel garden plant. The tour climaxed with the spotting of *Euphorbia monchiquensis* which is found in this part of the Algarve.



White *Lavandula stoechas* hybrid



Natural swimming pool

04/04/19

On the last day of the pre-conference tour we were all whisked off to a private garden - Os Pelicanos. This garden is looked after by owners Tamsin and Chris. Originally, their house was a new build and was sold to them with lawns surrounding the property. Over the years they have removed all the lawns and starting at one side of the house worked their way around creating a garden using Mediterranean plants. They have a collection of *Citrus* and *Salvia* along with an organic fruit and veg patch. When we arrived the two of them

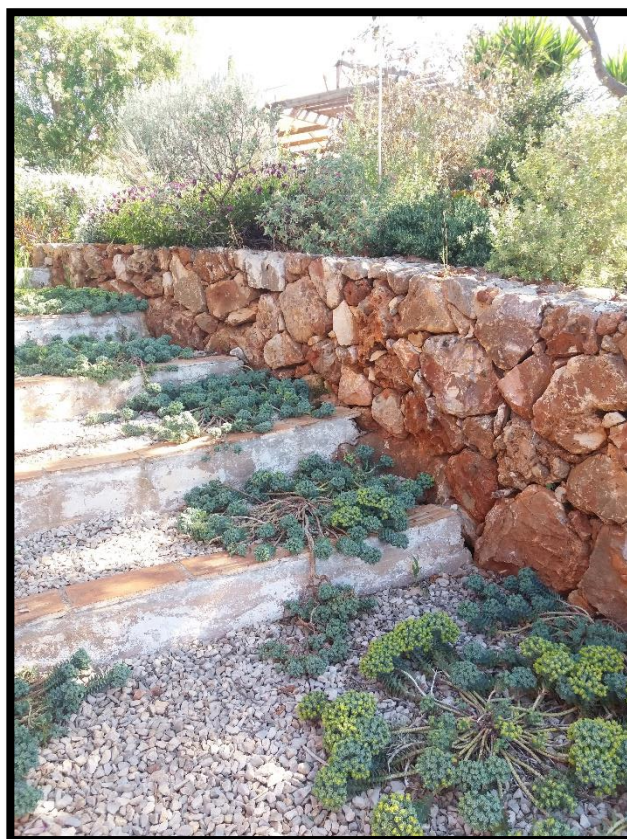
gave a short explanation about their plans for the garden. I was surprised to see *Tradescantia pallida purpurea* growing outside very happily at Tamsin and Chris's garden. Previously, I had only ever really seen it grown in tropical houses but Rosie explained that as it was growing in the shade it seemed to be happy and doesn't seem to mind the drought of the summer.

Keeping us on track, Rosie ushered us back to the minibus and we headed off to the Barrocal Botanic Garden. The other trainees and myself had already been to the garden on the Sunday before but were very happy to be taken around again. Most of the rest of the group had not been previously. Rosie and Rob gave everyone a tour of the garden explaining the garden principles and practices. Rosie pointed out an area of Spanish Bluebells which they had planted recently to encourage spreading of the bulbs. It amused me to see them planted deliberately in the botanic garden whereas back in my current workplace we have been diligently removing them since their leaves began to surface at the start of March.

Another relaxed lunch, this time a buffet meal at Cruz de Portugal in Silves where we were served barbequed pork belly and chicken, along with salad and chips. Another yummy meal. This brought us to the end of the pre-conference tour. We all returned to the hotel where the others picked up their luggage, said goodbye to us trainees and returned to the minibuses to continue on to attend the conference in Evora.



Bougainvillea growing along a wall at Tamsin's property



Euphorbia myrsinites growing along gravel lined steps.

05/04/19

Friday was the day we travelled back from Faro Airport to London Gatwick. Two of us said goodbye at Faro as they were flying to London Luton and I said goodbye to one of the other trainees at Gatwick and rushed to grab my train after the late departure of our flight meant that I caught my train with 3 minutes to spare. Running through Gatwick with 5 minutes until your train leaves is stressful business.

Conclusion

I would like to thank again the Merlin Trust for the bursary funding I received enabling me to attend the pre-conference tour at the Algarve. I learned so much through meeting new experienced gardeners and people

from varying backgrounds with so much knowledge to give. I achieved a new understanding of native Portuguese plants and Mediterranean planting schemes which I hope to carry forward to the future. All of this trip, enhanced my professional development and to be very honest, was immensely fun.

Useful Information sources

Mediterranean Gardening Association Portugal. Website:

<http://www.mediterraneangardeningportugal.org/index.html>

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Marilyn Medina Ribeiro – www.waterwisegardens.com

Udo and Claudia Schwarzer – www.biopiscinas.pt

Dr. Gerhard Zabel – Quinta da Figueirinha

John Humphris – Professional Gardeners Guild