

# Merlin Trust Report

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Tresco Abbey Gardens Work Experience  
13th- 24th May 2013

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I arranged to go to Tresco Gardens for 2 weeks of work experience staying in staff accommodation on the island and working full time in the gardens. I was lucky enough to receive funding from the Merlin Trust to help with the cost of travel by train to Penzance and for the Scillionian ferry to the Scilly Isles. I was very grateful for this, without financial help I would not have been able to go.

### Tresco History

Tresco Gardens were created by Augustus Smith after he had taken over the lease of the entire island from the Duchy of Cornwall in 1834. He created a shelter belt to protect the garden site from hard coastal winds taking advantage of the mild climate to begin planting an exotic collection of plants that would not survive on the UK mainland. Temperatures very rarely drop below 0 °C on the Scilly Isles so many exotic and Mediterranean plants are able to survive and thrive.

Despite the generally mild climate, the garden has suffered a number of climatic disasters. In 1929 a five day storm destroyed around 600 trees badly damaging the shelter belt. More recently in 1987 during heavy frost and snow almost 70% of flowering plants were lost and again in 1990 a hurricane almost 70% of trees were damaged or lost. Although the garden has suffered great losses as a result of extreme weather it has also created opportunities to develop and modify the garden.

## Working in the Garden

I arrived on Monday at lunch time and managed to join a tour of the gardens for the afternoon which gave me a good introduction to the layout and large variety of plants grown at Tresco. On the tour Head Gardener Andrew pointed out many of Tresco's important and interesting plant species. He pointed out many *Protea* and *Banksia* species that I had never seen before but the stand out tree for me was *Araucaria heterophylla*, the Norfolk Island Pine. It is endemic to Norfolk Island which is an island in the Pacific Ocean between Australia and New Zealand. The tree has a very distinctive and bold shape; its trunk has a very straight growth habit and symmetrical branches that form a star shape at the tip of the tree.



**Tresco Garden's *Araucaria heterophylla***

During my two weeks at Tresco I worked with the garden team and students on day to day garden maintenance. One of the things I found most interesting was weeding. Weeding is part of every garden job but at Tresco the weeds were not the usual chickweed or bittercress. The sandy, free-draining soil of the gardens is perfect for seed germination. The weeds we pulled throughout the garden were almost all self-seeded from established plants and trees within the garden. Seedlings that have spread are often left to flower but many become an invasive problem if left to spread too freely. We were constantly pulling *Trachycarpus* seedlings and many other tree seedlings that other gardens would struggle to germinate at all. I wanted to save them all and take them back to the mainland but there were so many I had to compost them.



***Geranium maderense***

A common self-seeded plant that was a visitor favourite and also a personal favourite is *Geranium maderense*. It is the largest geranium and is native to the island of Madeira. I really liked the growth habit of this plant, the leaves flop down towards the ground when buds appear like an explosion creating a dome of flowers. It looks quite mad!

As well as general weeding and clearing debris through the beds, raking the gravel paths and clearing *Cordyline* leaves that were spread throughout the garden on windy nights I spent a lot of time mowing the grass. Tresco gardeners mow the grass all year round as it never gets cold enough for the grass to have a dormant season. I enjoyed practising mowing as I have not had much practise at Eden because there isn't much grass in the garden. I was told that the grass looks better if it is cut in a different direction each time. The gardeners rotate the cutting pattern to keep the grass standing upright. I tried out various different patterns, diagonal, vertical and horizontal just for practise.

I recognised some plants at Treco from the Mediterranean Biome at Eden. Eden has many *Banksia* and *Protea* species but I almost didn't recognise one of my favourite trees in the Med-  
*Leucadendron argenteum*, the Silver Tree. The Head Gardener Andrew told me that most plants in Proteaceae family enjoy wind, especially wind through their foliage which helps them to grow strong branches and strong roots to anchor them against blowing over. One thing that is not present in the biome is wind. This has resulted in an unauthentic growth habit of sprawling, leggy growth though the *Protea* seem to flower well in both environments.



*Leucadendron argenteum*



*Brugmansia* flower

Another favourite tree I came across was the *Brugmansia* which I had never seen before visiting Tresco. It is known by the common name Angel's Trumpets because of the long, pendulous flower and it is native to tropical regions of South America. They are poisonous with hallucinogenic properties. It has been historically used by many South American cultures as part of ritualistic practise. One of the students told me he often tells tour groups that Victorian ladies often grew *Brugmansia* in their conservatories and added flower parts to their afternoon tea!

For a few days I worked with Iain and Emma, two of the students at Tresco. We worked on pruning the large *Chamelias* which needed re-shaping. We used secateurs and pole pruners on tall ladders to reach the highest growth. We reduced the side growth to widen the paths and lowered and rounded the top growth to create a tighter form. These *Chamelias* are very old and have a lot of dead wood within them, hopefully this semi-hard prune will help to rejuvenate the plants for prominent flowering next year.



**Gardener Emma pruning *Chamelias***



We spent one day weeding and digging over a large bed that runs either side of the pathway leading to the Neptune Steps sculpture which is a popular visitor attraction. We prepared the soil for planting by weeding, levelling and forking then planted staggered rows of *Rudbeckia grandiflora* 'Sundance' for summer colour.



**Planted *Rudbeckias***

I had a great time working at Tresco and it was amazing to see so many plants growing outside in a natural environment that I had only ever seen before under glass or in the biomes at Eden.

I'll finish my report with a few images of Tresco Island and Gardens.



*Aloe and agave bed*



*Aloe in full flower and Washingtonia in the old Abbey*

