

**Professional Gardener's Guild Study Trip  
to the Algarve 2015**



**By John Gould**

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## **Introduction**

My name is John Gould and I am a 25 year old trainee gardener, part of the Professional Gardener's Guild (PGG) traineeship scheme. This report is a detailed account of my study trip to the Algarve that was funded by the PGG and Merlin Trust. The scheme is for three years and involves working for a variety of gardens across the country, providing me with the most varied Horticultural experience possible.

I am currently in the first year of the scheme at Waddesdon Manor that is a country house in the village of Waddesdon, near Aylesbury in Buckinghamshire. This is a parkland garden that specialises in colourful annual bedding display and is one of the countries most recognised.

I was one of five trainees that had the opportunity to visit Portugal and experience the wonderful plant life and gardens it had to offer. The visit was a two week study experience trip with four other fellow PGG trainees. Thanks to Rosie Peddle, Secretary at Mediterranean Gardening Association, I joined fellow trainees Robert Burstow who is a colleague from Waddesdon, in his first year, Jo Huckvale works at Chatsworth House in Derbyshire and is in her third year, Dagmar Mueller is currently at Savill Garden in Windsor and Becky Cross who is at the National Botanic Garden of Wales and are both in their second year.

As I write this report, I am thinking of what a fantastic two weeks I have had, I've met some really lovely people, experienced and visited some interesting historical gardens and their cultures. Looking through the numerous photos of amazing landscapes and wild Mediterranean plants, the leaflets I've gathered from gardens visited and wild flower walks and my endless notes I have written of my journey. How am I going to tell you about this trip in so little words.

## **Background**

Our study trip started off with a week in Parques de Sintra which is 30 minutes from Lisbon and 930 hectares of Woodland Landscape which since 1995 has been a World Heritage Site. We were privileged enough to spend four days working with the Monserrate Palace Garden, which was a fantastic experience and we were lucky enough to take part in a project to prepare a large Mediterranean border. We visited the Sintra National Place, Pena Palace Garden, Moorish Castle and Quinta da Regaleira and the trip was funded by the PGG.

Week two, funded by the Merlin Trust and brilliantly organised by the Mediterranean Gardening Association. Started on Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> April, we had a long four hour train journey from Sintra to a train station just outside Silves in the Algarve. I was really excited in anticipation of what we would discover especially the wild flora and what

we would find growing in the many different landscapes that the Algarve had to offer. It would be interesting to find out how the climate makes an impact on the gardening overall.

We arrived at Silves about 3.30 p.m. in the afternoon, it was very hot, quite different to the previous week that was mixed weather conditions. At the train station, we were met by Dr. Gerhard Zabel, owner of the Quinta de Figueirinha, who arrived in a very old Mercedes and seemed a very knowledgeable and interesting character. His first challenge with me was to get my extremely heavy suitcase on the roof of his car! Following a ten minute drive, we arrived at Quinta and what a surprise, I was so surprised that my first texted to family was to state that we had a swimming pool, brilliant! and a bar, which of course I would not use.

The Quinta da Figueirinha was founded in 1988 by the agronomic engineers Dr. Gerhard Zabel and Uta Zabel, his wife who had worked on development projects in South Portugal. Unfortunately Uta passed away in 2002 and it is now left to Gerhard to run the place.

The site had previously been used for bio-agricultural farming and is now being used by holiday makers which are looking for something different from the typical beach seeking tourist but his dream is to create botanical gardens. I can see why the place is being used for tourism because the surround landscape was amazing Monchique Mountains and it is a view I did not get tired of seeing every morning.

Over the next seven days, I will take you through my tour, visiting the wonderful gardens and landscapes and what knowledge I gained with fellow trainees.

### **Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> March**

This was our first full day in the Algarve and after having our Mediterranean breakfast, which was kindly provided by the staff at the bar, we all got greeted by Dr Gerhard Zabel who wanted give us a quick tour of the orange groves and have a chat about some of the amazing trees that are growing in Quinta de Figueirinha.

There were two types of oranges growing in these orange groves which are sweet oranges (*Citrus sinensis*) and sour oranges (*Citrus × aurantium*). Gerhard told us that we were allowed to help ourselves to as many oranges as we'd like, what was fantastic. The difference in taste of the sweet oranges that you just picked off the trees is mind blowing but unfortunately on the one occasion I accidentally picked sour orange, which left a bitter taste in my mouth!.

The warmer climate in the Algarve, is perfect weather conditions for growing and ripening citrus fruit but unfortunately most of these amazing fruit will be left to rot because there are way too many of them. Also, I do not think that Gerhard has the time, facilities or staff and financial resources to pick this amount of oranges and go into orange production and then transporting the oranges for wax coating and treatment to stop them rotting. Although, these rotten oranges do not go to complete

waste because they will eventually degrade and change into organic matter, providing nutrients for the orange trees to help them fruit again next season.

One tree that Gerhard was passionate about and showed us was the Carob tree (*Ceratonia siliqua*) estimated to be 500-700 years old. The Carob tree is native to the Mediterranean region, very well adapted to the very warm and dry climate and is one of the reasons for this is because it develops a waxy layer surface on the ovate, dark top side and light green underside. The waxy layer helps reduce water (xylem) loss and copes much better in drought conditions.

For most people, the most important feature of this tree is elongated flat fruit pods that can be straight or curved which is a very important resource for so many reasons. The pod consists of two main parts, made up of different compositions and is separately used to produce different products and uses. The pulp accounts for 90% and the seeds for 10% of the total weight of the pod. The ripe and dry pods are commonly used to create a carob powder that is used as a substitute for cocoa powder. The pods are also used as animal feed, as a food additive (E number), sweetener, syrup to create medicine for coughs and sore throat and a liqueur can even be made from the pods. I do not think I have ever known a tree's fruit that has so many uses apart from a carob.

During the afternoon Rosie Peddle, who is a secretary for the Mediterranean Gardening Association, arrived in Quinta de Figuerinha, had a chat with the five of us to give us a run-down on what was planned for the week ahead. She kindly gave us a copy of the Field Guide To The Wild Flowers of the Algarve to help us identify some of the wildflowers that we could see over the week.

We were then given a tour of the Exotic Garden that had a wide range of fruit trees, some that would not fruit or even survive in a UK climate. One of the amazing sights I saw was an Avocado tree (*Persea americana*), native to Mexico and Central America. Other amazing fruit trees that we found growing were a Star Fruit tree (*Averrhoa carambola*), native to Southeast Asia and India and produces an oblong shape and when cut into resembles a star shape hence the name of the tree. The fruit is usually used to be served in salads, as a garnish on avocado or seafood and is also in India, the ripe fruit is administered to halt hemorrhages and to relieve bleeding hemorrhoids. Unfortunately I was unable to see the Star Fruit tree in fruit but it was still a rare sight to see it as an established tree which I found amazing.

In the evening, we had other members from the Mediterranean Gardening Association arrive and we were all treated to a presentation by Rosie Peddle, originally presented by acclaimed author and horticulturist John Fielding. We were shown pictures of several wildflowers and locations in the Algarve and environments that they are able to grow in. There are many different soil types in the Algarve ranging from sandy, rich and poor clay, acid and alkaline soils. Over the week we will find out what plants will grow in the different soil conditions.

She spoke about the Algarve being split up into three different geological regions which are litoral, barrocal and serra with each having their own different vegetation and flora. The litoral covers the coastal land that runs along the southern-most strip of the region right up to western coast above the Cape St Vincent peninsula. The litoral is made up of sedimentary rocks, alluvia and sand.

The barrocal is region located inland within the Algarve, which is composed of mostly limestone that means the soil will be more alkaline. The altitude increases as you go north as it merges with the mountainous region of the Serra. Serra has the highest peaks of the Algarve with Foia at 902 metres and Picota 773 metres that can be found in this area. The geology area is made up of older rocks in particular shale and syenite and has more of an acidic soil. We will visit locations in all three regions over the week and see what types of wild flora growing in each of the unique growing conditions.

Rosie's presentation highlighted the certain issues with irrigation in the Algarve and what is sustainable for watering plants in a climate that has most of its rain during the winter months. Rosie has a strong view that lawns have no place in a Algarve garden due to the amount of irrigation the grass needs to survive especially during the summer months, as it is just not sustainable, which I tend to agree with. Rosie's view is that grass areas should be left to grow naturally that would enable some really amazing wild flowers in the Algarve and would make any garden look amazing.

The one downside to this is that during the summer all the wildflowers and grass turn brown and die back due to dry summers, which tends to put people off but Rosie's opinion is that this is part of a life cycle and we should appreciate the wildflowers when they are around.

Another problem is that UK expats who believe that it is possible to grow an English garden in the Algarve, which again is not sustainable with the amount of watering that they require and should really grow plants that can adapt to the climate.

### **Monday 30<sup>th</sup> March**

This was the start of our second full day and I got woke up a 6:30 am as I got the impression that my fellow PGG trainees do not understand that concept of a lie in bed and the excitement of the day prevented me from going back to sleep.

After breakfast that was kindly provided the lady and gentleman at the bar, we got into a 90's Citroen Berlingo car provided by Rosie Peddle that we used to transport ourselves to the different locations in the Algarve. The Citroen did a great job of getting us from A to B but the gear lever that Rosie best describes as a stick in a bucket.

Becky was given the task of driving the five of us on a 45 minute journey to a protected landscape of Rocha da Pena where we were greeted by Rosie Peddle

who was our guide. The Rocha da Pena is located inland part of the barrocal geological region.

On the Rocha da Pena plateau there are two ancient stone walls that were built as defence during the Iron Age. Later the Moor's was used to defend the Rocha's plateau, as they took shelter in a cave during the re-conquest of Christian King D.Afonso III, when D.Paio Peres Correia captured the castle of Salir. This cave was used to hide in, now known as the 'Moor's Cavern'.

The Rocha da Pena's protected landscape is a very well pedestrian course the 4.7km (2.9 miles) where most people come to admire the limestone rock. This has suffered chemical erosion that have formed into fissures and cave. There is a 2 km long plateau and a rocky slope that is 50m in height with some pretty stunning views at top of the hill with a maximum altitude of 479m. The Rocha da Pena is also home to many different forms of wildlife including birds such as a European Bee Eater, Buzzard, Cuckoo, Jay and Grey Heron. There are also mammals such as Rabbits, Fox, Genet, Mongoose and even wild boar.

As much as these aspects of the Rocha da Pena are amazing our purpose of this trip was to look at the beautiful flora that is growing in this pretty special landscape. With most of the landscape is made of limestone that creates of alkaline PH and makes it almost impossible for acid loving plants to grow.

There are over 500 species of flora with some of them being native, medicinal and aromatic. Most of trees that are growing in the area are the Olive tree (*Olea europea* var. *europea*), Carob Tree (*Ceratonia siliqua*) and Lusitanian Oak (*Quercus faginea*). One of the trees that we all would see a lot of over the coming week was the Dwarf Fan Palm (*Chamaerop humilis*), which is the native palm tree of the Algarve. As in its name it is a low growing palm which only reaches a height of 2m with evergreen, fan-like which are tough and have spikes along the leaf petiole. Flowers are yellow in colour and can reach up to 35cm long and later produce yellow or brown fruit.

Two of the medicinal species that we discovered was the *Hypericum perforatum* that is an evergreen shrub which produces yellow star shaped flowers. It can be used as an antidepressant and can be toxic especially to livestock. One disappointment is the aromatic plants that grow in the Rocha da Pena, a French Lavender (*Lavandula stoechas*), which was not in flower but you could still smell the beautiful scent.

Unsurprisingly, due to the alkaline soil the most common flora that was growing in the Rocha da Pena was a *Cistus Albidus* that thrives in these growing conditions. This compact shrub has very cleverly adapted to the very warm and wind climate that is presented to it because it is low growing to reduce the xylem (water cells) being blown off from the surface of the leaf by the strong winds and dying out the plant. Also, the leaves have developed hairs on the surface that have helped reflect the sunlight, blocking the movement of air, reducing water loss and the light grey colour of leaves also absorbs less sunlight the green leaves. The main feature of this *Cistus* is large lilac-pink flowers and seeing such a large group of them growing together naturally was a stunning sight.



The star of Rocha da Pena has to be the *Paeonia broteroi* producing large, bowl shaped, pink flowers which are usually short lived, so we were very lucky to see amazing flower. This *Paeonia* is another plant which is native to the Algarve and its basal leaves are divided into between 9 and 16 leaflets and *Paeonia broteroi* are distinctly blue-green on their undersides.

We were lucky enough to see lots of wild orchids growing in the area with my personal favourite was the Woodcock Orchid (*Ophrys scolopax*). The flower described as a flower that spikes to a very variable height of 10–50 cm (4–20 in) tall with a standard structure and has three outer sepals, which may be lighter or darker shades of green or violet, the lightest appearing white. The upper (dorsal) sepal varies from flat to boat-shaped and is bent backwards at the base and then curves forwards. The lateral petals may be pink to violet in colour, or green. This complex three-dimensional shape is strongly patterned and divided at the base into three lobes. It reminds me of a little brown man wearing a waistcoat with lilac pink flowery hat.

The other three Orchids that we discovered was *Ophrys speculum* and *lutea*, *Anacamptis pyramidalis* and the other plant that amazed me was the *Scilla peruviana* which is a low growing, evergreen leafed, native blub that produces a huge flower head of blue, star shaped flowers. We were told by Rosie that the Algarve had quite a dry winter that resulted in the Wildflower display not being up to their best but never the less I was very impressed with what I saw and that only wetted my appetite.

During the afternoon we all got back on the road to a woodland just outside Fornalha which is located in the Serra geology region with more acidic soil. On the road, what I did notice was there was a lot of Cork Oak (*Quercus suber*) with the bark striped. The Cork Oak provides such an important resource as the Algarve is a big supplier of cork and it is amazing how much skill must be involved to strip the bark without causing any harm to the tree and going too far into the cambium layer.

When we arrived in the woodland we had to immediately stop the car because we got a glimpse of a field covered with yellow flower, so we had to check it out. What we found was the area was completely covered in *Lupinus lutes*, which a hairy annual plant. The *Lupinus* produced breath-taking 16mm spikes of bright yellow, pea shaped flowers and produced a sea of yellow and went on as far as the eye could see.

We then moved into Quinta dos Tesouros where Rosie wanted to show us two amazing trees that are outside a very nice café and hotel. The first was a Carob tree (*Ceratonia siliqua*) which was about 250-300 years old



that was amazing but would be kind of over shadowed by a 1000 year old + Olive tree (*Olea europea* var. *europea*). Some of the reasons why Olive trees live so long is because of how hardy, drought, disease and fire resistant they are. If that wasn't enough we had another old tree to see in Rota da Cortica which was *Quercus ilex* subsp. *rotundifolia* and this was by far the biggest tree that we saw all day. The age of the tree was about 650 years old and is stunning and what really strikes me is the

location as it was by a housing estate and next to a busy road. This is a strange location for such an amazing tree and is a form of evergreen oak with broad leaves that are dark green above and pale whitish-grey with dense short hairs underneath.

## **Tuesday 31<sup>st</sup> March**

Today I was nominated to drive the Citroen Berlingo which I was quite excited about because not very often do I get the opportunity to drive on foreign roads. It was the first time I'd drove a car with the driver's seat on the left hand side of the car. I found it especially confusing with changing gears in my right hand and when I first drove off my instinct was to use my left hand where the gear would be and in doing so I hit the side of the car door.

The location for the five of us was Rosie Peddle house, as she wanted to show us around her privet garden. Before we were given a tour we were all given a plant identification challenge that consisted of a list of trees, shrubs ornamental grasses and climbers and we had to take cuttings from each plant which we all did pretty well. One of the plants that did catch us all out was *Medicago arborea* which I unfortunately made the mistaking of thinking it was a *Cytisus* because the two of them look quite similar. This evergreen shrub has small, oval, dark green leaves and produces yellow, pea shaped flowers that are drought resistant and would be great for the Algarve climate. I think the ident was a great way of reinforcing what plants we have learnt and discover over the first few days.

One of the plants I did find familiar was the *Quercus coccifera* that grows in the wild at Rocha da Pena and is very different to most Oaks because it is a compact shrub. It has small, oval, evergreen, dark green and pale green underneath, leathery, wavy and sharply toothed leaves and develops acorns that are 2–3 cm long.

Rosie's garden is a very informal garden that feels very free flowing with not a lawn in sight which I should have guessed with her strong views against lawns growing in this climate that I do agree with. With the combination of Mediterranean trees, shrubs and a number of wildflowers that Rosie has decided to let grow. One of the most interesting features in Rosie's garden is a bio swimming pond which is something you do not see in many gardens. This is very different to your standard swimming pool because the water is clear but without the use of chemicals and it is home to plants and animal. I did notice that there was a few frogs swimming in the corner of the pond but it makes you feel like that you are swimming in natural water and I think is really incorporates with the natural feel of the garden.

One of the shrubs that is growing wild in the Algarve that surprised me was the *Phlomis purpurea* which is used as an ornamental shrub in a formal garden in the UK and here it is growing in its natural environment that is amazing. The *Phlomis purpurea* produces beautiful purple / pink flowers, pea shaped flowers in the form of clusters and is well adapted to the warm and dry climate with the evergreen, ovate, grey-green leaves that have hairs along the surface. The *Cistus albidus* in Rocha da Pena can help reflect the sunlight and blocks the movement of air reducing water loss.

During the afternoon we travelled down to Parque Natural da Ria Formosa that is a nature trail of 18,400 hectare site that travels from Anção, near Almancil, all the way to Vila Real de Santo Antonio and covers 60 km of the eastern Algarve Coast. This was our first opportunity to discover what the litoral geological region had to offer in wildflowers with its sandy soil near the coast. Again like the barrocal region the litoral is also made up of alkaline limestone soils, so the PH will be quite high and only alkaline loving plants will be able to grow in this area.

After the disappointment of not seeing any *Lavandula stoechas* in flower yesterday in the Rocha da Pena I was very pleased to find some in the Ria Formosa just in between *Pinus pinea* which is



one of the most common Pine trees growing in the Algarve coast. It is quite easy to recognise this Pine because it has an umbrella-like growth habit and if you look up close you will see the 10-20cm long needles leaves and will eventually develop ovate, shiny and red-brown coloured cones. The *Lavandula stoechas* has linear, grey coloured leaves which has an amazing and very well-known scent and the flowers have a very distinct long, purple bracts that look a bit like rabbit's 'ears' and the flower spike on top a long stem.

One of the smaller wild flora that we found growing underneath that the *Pinus pinea* was some *Pancratium maritimum* with is a small bulbous perennial which has tiny, grey green and hairless leaves and produces white, scent, bell-like flowers. We also discover some *Foeniculum vulgare* that is commonly known as wild fennel which is

medium sized, short lived perennial and has 3- to 4-pinnate leaves with hair-like segments and is very well known for its aromatic qualities. It also develops flat umbels of small yellow flowers onto of long stems.

Along the coastline I noticed there was a lot of *Carpobrotus edulis* which was trailing long in the sand. This is a form of low growing succulent, mat-forming perennial that has linear, fleshy leaves and beautiful, large, daisy-like flowers which start off yellow and slowly fading to a pale pink.

As we cross over the bridge we spotted probably the most colourful flowering plant growing on the coastline which was a *Lupinus micranthus* even though this is one of the more short and small flowering of the Lupines. The reason why this Lupin is much shorter is because it has adapted to conditions by growing closer to the ground that reduces the amount of moisture that is lost in the surface of the leaves. The flowers on *Lupinus micranthus* are blue, pea shaped with a white center and has palmate leaves which have a hairy surface and that is why it is commonly known as the Hairy Lupin.

There was even a wild cactus (*Opuntia maxima*) that like most cactus's do not actually have leaves but it has large, blue-green, flattened jointed stem sections and unlike most plants the photosynthesis process takes place in the stems. This *Opuntia* has very well known spikes which yellow and touching have would be best avoided. The flowers are normally yellow when they first develop but had finished when we saw them but we were lucky enough to see the egg-shaped fruit which had just ripened in a red colour.

We yet again hit the road and made a quick stop outside the one of the largest plant nurseries in the Algarve, a Dutch company called Schroll that is well known for growing Hydrangeas. As much as these are ideal temperatures to grow the Hydrangeas I do not particularly agree with its location because I do not think it is sustainable. The amount of water being used at the nursery to run the automatic irrigation and the fact that there was a lack of rain over the winter months this could cause a shortage this year.

The final place that we visited was an orange grove in Quinta da Para where we went to see one of the oldest and most spectacular trees we have seen all week. The tree was a 1000 year old Carob tree (*Ceratonia siliqua*) and the trunk was about 20m in diameter which made it a monster of a tree.

## Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> April

April Fool's Day but there was no time for fooling around even though Becky and Jo decided it would be a good idea to hide Rob's boots in the oven. Today the plan was to visit people who are members of the Mediterranean Garden Association and to see their gardens.

The first garden we visited was Margaret's that was just outside the city of Albufeira in the Faro district. Margaret is a landscape architect and this is the third garden that she has been involved in designing. It was the smallest garden that we visited with a patio type layout but despite that it really felt very free flowing with a main pathway through the centre of the garden, which was slightly curve to keep it as free flowing as possible and walk ways around the outside. The plant life was made up of a mixture of Mediterranean shrubs and succulents in containers.

The whole garden has been sheltered by *Washingtonia robusta* which like *Chamaerops humilis* has fan-like leaves but are much larger and the overall palm is a lot taller with an enormous trunk and is native to Mexico. The other trees growing in this little patio garden was a *Musa basjoo*, a very commonly used banana plant used in ornamental



gardens. This tree creates an amazing environment that takes you away from the busy urban environment to a beautiful garden.

One of the most amazing things I seen but would have never thought would have grown in a garden and is part of the Cactaceae (Cactus) family and to my amazement I found out was a *Euphorbia milii*. Never in a million years would I have guessed that it is a *Euphorbia* because it is so different to the *Euphorbias* I have ever seen. *Euphorbia milii* is native to Madagascar and forms succulent, climbing shrub, which is known for its thorns along its branches. It develops small, red, petal-like bracts flowers and the leaves are evergreen, small, green and oval shaped that only

grow on young stems and the sap can be quite poisonous which can causes irritation on contact with skin or eyes.

One perennial, clumping forming plant that I have seen growing quite a lot in Algarve is *Strelitzia reginae* or more commonly known as the Bird of Paradise. It has evergreen broad, oblong leaves but it is better known for its striking flowers which come in the form of orange and blue like spires that open in succession of beak-like spathe hence the plant's common name. It would be easy to say that this is one of the most striking flowers I have ever seen and just blows me away.



The next property we visited was a few minutes drive down the road from our last garden that was just outside Albufeira. Vivienne had a completely different garden, it was a bit larger at 11,000 square metres (about 2 acres), which was split into different sections that included a dry garden, cottage garden, Mediterranean and Tropical Garden.

The first area of her garden we got to see was the dry garden, which was alongside a lake with Water Lilies (*Nymphaea*) growing along the water edge, which the owners dog decide it would be a good idea to have swim. The dry garden had some pretty impressive plants growing that included a Dragon Tree (*Dracaena draco*), a subtropical tree that is native to Canary Islands, Cape Verde, Madeira and western Morocco.

The leaves on the *Dracaena draco* are evergreen, linear and almost sword shaped which are 60cm in length. The height of the tree can grow up to is 4.8m (15.7ft) by 10-15 years. The flowers produce a greenish-white flower that later change to an orange or red berries. The plant had one of the most interesting and stunning red flowers in the garden called *Eucalyptus macrocarpa* that I was unaware they produced. The plant is native to south-west of Australia and grows to 100 mm in

diameter. The plant has leaves that are also very attractive with a silver-grey colour and ovate-elliptic shape and also have a very unique mallee-type growth habit.

The plants that really took my interest was the *Agave americana* 'Variegata', which is very similar to the ones that have grown in the wild but have a creamy-white stripe along the edges of the fleshy, spiny-edged, grey-green, evergreen leaves. Other plants that were growing in the dry garden of *Yucca gloriosa*, a carpet of *Osteospermum* and a huge *Eucalyptus citriodora* that Vivienne told us had been grown from seed.

We all then moved onto the cottage garden, a more traditional design and one of the first things that I noticed about it was that Vivienne had decided to grow a lawn in this section. It puzzled me a bit especially as I was aware that the lawn would need a lot of watering to maintain and ensure continued growth, especially in the Algarve. The garden was a more formal style compared to the day garden for formal beds and a swimming pool..

In the cottage garden, one of the first plants to greet us as walked was a beautiful *Wisteria* growing along a pergola with its lilac-coloured racemes dangling above us with the swimming pool surrounded by Palm trees that included *Washingtonia robusta* and *Phoenix canariensis*, as well as some *Phormium tenax*, *Yucca gloriosa* and more *Osteospermum*.

The final area was the Mediterranean and Tropical garden again made up of formal style borders with many Mediterranean and Tropical shrubs and perennial plants which are split up for a small strip of lawn that gently flows across the garden. One shrub that did really impress me was the *Senna didymobotrya*, commonly known as the Peanut Butter Cassia that is native to Africa. It produces striking, large flower spikes that are yellow in colour and have attractive black buds before they open. One of the more unique features was the leaves that are pinnate with oval shaped leaflets when rubbed it can produce what is best described as a buttered popcorn scent and I am a big fan of popcorn. With beautiful yellow flowers and leaves that smell like popcorn this for me was a perfect ornamental shrub and I'd like one in my garden but unfortunately it needs a warm climate and it will not survive the unpredictable British weather and cold winters which is a real shame.

Our next stop on our tour of the Albufeira was one of the most popular garden centres in the Algarve called Natura, which has been running for 24 years. The garden centre was well stock in ornamental plants that are suitable for growing in the Mediterranean climate of the Algarve including:

## Succulents Plants

- Aloe candelabrum
- Aloe ferox
- Agave americana

## Palm Trees

- Dypsis decaryi
- Sabal mexicana
- Chamaerops humilis
- Phoenix canariensis

## Shrubs

- Teucrium fruticans 'Azureum'
- Pleomele anita
- Hibiscus rosa-sinensis
- Spartium junceum

One of the most impressive features of Natura Garden Centre is that it specialises in transplanting olive trees that are up to 1000 years old and not many garden centres can say that. What amazed me is how little root system a Olive tree needs to be transplanted and all the root system are covered in soil and stored in a wire mesh frame with a weed control membrane as a liner.

Another thing that was really interesting is that Natura have been recently introducing a lawn alternative to the Algarve which is a plant called Zoysia. If you look from a distance it is like most common lawns but on closer inspection have broader leaves. A more important difference with Zoysia from most lawns is that it can adapted to the warm and dry conditions of



Algarve which mean it requires less water, it has much slower growth, requires less mowing and maintains a bright green colour without as much fertiliser. For all the British expats living in the Algarve wanting to grow a lawn this is your best and most sustainable option.

I have a lot of respect for the owner Jean-Claude DeFrance who before relocating to the Algarve and taking charge of Natura was instrumental in running one of the largest and most successful garden centres in Waster, France. I think he has put a lot of thought into the way the garden centre is run because he only uses trees, shrubs, climbers, bamboos, perennials, rock plants, water plants, cactus and succulents that will cope with the climate which makes sense. This only thing I do question is why there is a lack of native species which with the amount of wonderful native flora that is growing here why more is not used but I suppose we are only the same in the UK and what may be interesting to us may not be to the locals.

The last location we visited before we went home to the president of the Mediterranean Gardening Association was Burford Hurry wanted to show us around his garden and have a chat with us. He had a three tier terrace, patio garden with a very unique focal feature in the form of a water fall that I have never seen in a patio garden before.

The first plant we saw was a Carob tree (*Ceratonia siliqua*) that had been pruned into a dome shape and growing up one of the trees was a *Tillandsia cyanea*, which is a form of air plant that is one of the few plants that does not require soil and had attached itself to other plants to survive. It has wonderful flattened spikes of violet flowers that had developed pink bracts and the leaves are evergreen, narrow, linear, dark green in colour.

Like most terrace gardens most of the plants were in containers with succulents *Aloe vera*, evergreen perennials like Bird of Paradise (*Strelitzia reginae*) but that was all Thyme growing in between gaps in the stone wall and *Washingtonia robusta* growing on a tiny island in the middle of the river, which is a bit of a strange place for a palm tree to grow but oh well.

We finished our visits by sitting down to have tea and a piece of Folar de pascoa (Portuguese Easter bread) and had a chat, as Burford was quite interested about our backgrounds and what we get up to as a PGG Trainee.

### **Thursday 2nd April**

Today was a much different day compared to the previous days we'd spent in the Algarve as we stayed in Quinta de Figuerinha to take part in work experience to

help with Dr. Gerhard Zabel plans for the new botanical garden. The work would take place in a large area where lot of native flora was growing.

Before work could begin however we was introduced to Marilyn Medina Ribeiro who first moved into the Algarve in 2008 and initially qualified as a graphic designer but with her Grandmothers as they were two keen gardeners and encouraged her interest in plants from an early age so she decided to pursue a career in Horticulture. She then went on to gain a BSc in Landscape Management and RHS Certificate in Horticulture at evening classes at the same time. Her first line of work was for private clients and nurseries during the first two years and then she spent a year working part time for environmental consultancy Jacobs.



She then made the decision to move to Portugal to take the position of Head Gardener at Romantik Hotel Vivenda Miranda in Lagos, which she described as being a very exciting but challenging year. Then she went on to work as a Garden Manager at Hapimag where she used native plants to transform a very ordinary ground.

Now she runs her own business called Waterwise Garden which was founded in 2013 and where she designs gardens for clients that are more sustainable for the Mediterranean climate that require very little maintenance to grow. I really admire what Marilyn is doing because she is trying to change British expats mind-sets and take a more innovative approach to developing sustainable gardens in a very warm climate. They need to understand that English style garden are not realistic and require too much watering.

Marilyn was working with us and supervise our project to put together plant profile of the area that is made up of native flora and with her experience working with native

plants at Hapimag, it really helped us. The surrounding landscape was quite rocky with the soil type was red clay and the type of wild flora that we found growing in the area was:

- *Ceratonia siliqua*
- *Olea europaea* v. *sylvestris*
- *Quercus ilex rotundifolia*
- *Cistus albidus*
- *Lavandula stoechas*
- *Ancampitis pyramidalis*
- *Ophrys speculum*
- *Ophrys lutea*
- *Convolvulus althaeoides*
- *Phlomis purpurea*
- *Foeniculum vulgare*
- *Centaurea pullata*
- *Muscari comosum*

Hopefully, our little contribution today has made the first stepping stones to creating a plant database that will help Dr. Gerhard Zabel and his team with the massive task of create an established botanical garden. It was a privilege to see and have a small part of what will be years of hard work and I look forward to hearing how it progresses and hope visit again sometime in the future.

### **Friday 3rd April**

It would be our penultimate day in the Algarve which made us think where the time has gone but we had little to reflect as we had yet another busy schedule ahead of us.

Once again, we met up with Marilyn Medina Ribeiro who wanted to show us some of the gardens she has created for clients and how she has managed to make formal style gardens more sustainable and require less watering.

First we travelled to a hillside villa just outside the coastal town of Carvoeiro that before Marilyn came along the entire garden was an area of lawn, it had exposed bedrock, the soil did not retain much moisture and plants required more watering than others. This left the English owners scratching their heads as to why their garden was struggling despite all the irrigation systems but areas of the garden were on sloping sections and the water simply ran off.

A major overhaul was required and what Marilyn had done to the garden is simply amazing. The soil itself was pretty good and the rockery had been remodelled to create the flat surfaces that made it easier for plants to establish. She had also

picked plants that are more suitable for the climate with *Convolvulus cneorum*, *Ceanothus*, *Rosmarinus officinalis*, *Aloe sinkatana* and *Bryophyllum manginii*.



My favourite

plant that was growing in this rockery was the *Kalanchoe manginii*, a succulent plant that has fleshy, oval leaves and stunning bell shaped, red flowers. Just seeing all these succulent plants growing in an outdoor planting scheme is something I have never seen before and would normally only be seen growing in a conservatory in the UK.

We then made our way further down the garden where we spotted a Mediterranean Walk with a mixture of topical shrubs, colourful herbs and dancing *Stipa* grasses that provided movement and a nice flow to this part of the garden. This used to be a long narrow corridor of lawn and now it has been completely transformed with gravel and slab pavement making it a modern, hard landscape element to the garden. This is far more ecological when it comes to saving water because the lawn does no longer require that regular irrigation and even though there was topical plant with required

some irrigation for the first couple of year, it will not need any after they become established.

One of the most interesting plants that were used in the Mediterranean Walk was the *Polygala myrtifolia* an evergreen shrub that is native to South Africa that produces purple and white, pea shaped flowers and can adapt to dry conditions. I also noticed that there was quite a few *Phlomis purpurea* and *Cistus albidus* that was great to see and the fact that Marilyn has used native plants with the topical plants, which I think really works well and is guaranteed to grow in the climate.

In the afternoon we swiftly moved on to the second of the projects that is located in near Penina Hotel & Golf Resort, close to Portimão. Like the first garden this had a very formal approach to creating a Mediterranean garden, as it was very colourful with displays of evergreen perennial and was full of contrasting colours that really worked well. All the plants have been planted underneath a layer of gravel that looked great and would hold on to some moisture and suppress weeds, which is important in a formal garden like this one.

Many different colours were used in the displays and these included the absolutely stunning *Echium candicans* with their massive blue flower spikes which is native to the island of Madeira, *Convolvulus cneorum* has white cup shaped flowers and silvery leaves,

*Phlomis fruticosa* with yellow, pea shaped flower spikes and grey / green, hairy leaves, *Stachys byzantine* 'Big Ears' and *Salvia coccinea* with the fiery red, pea shaped flowers. There are many different colours



of flowers and leaves in all shapes and sizes but they all seem to work very well together.

Dotted in the centre of this perennial flower power of colour is some quite large rock pieces that really give that display structure and instead of detracting from the amazing plants, it compliments it. I also really liked the idea of using *Jasminum polyanthum* trained to grow up a wood post and using it as a walkway of scent.

There was also an area of succulents that included Aloe, Agave, Sempervivum and Echeveria.

Overall I was really impressed with the two gardens and it open my eyes to what can be done with a hot and dry climate like the Algarve and how important it is to choose carefully the right plants for these environmental conditions, as well as ground conditions. I think Marilyn should be proud of the work she has done and hopefully she will widen the imagination of residents in the Algarve to develop an eco-conscious approach with their gardens.

### **Saturday 4th April**

Today, unfortunately would be the last day of our amazing week in the Algarve and the five of us wanted to end it on a high. The first thing we had to do was to load up the dependable but underpowered Citroen Berlingo with a heavy a bulky suitcases and bags which is only going to slow in down further. We said our goodbyes to Dr. Gerhard Zabel who had provided us with great hospitality. I wished him the of best luck with his new botanical garden and said I'd definitely want to visit in a few years' time to see the progress he has made.

Being our last day we was given the freedom to choose what we all wanted do, so between myself, Rob, Becky, Dagmar and Jo we decided to travel down with the Berlingo to one of the most southern points of the Algarve coastline known as Cape St. Vincent. This particular coastline is historically well known for several naval battles that were fought in the vicinity of this Cape as early as 1337. The Castilian fleet defeated a Portuguese fleet and the last in 1833 when Loyalist Portuguese fleet defeated the Miguelites during Portugal's Liberal Wars.

There was also an amazing 79ft lighthouse that had been built on the ruins of 16th century Franciscan convent in 1846 but this was not what we came to see. The wild flora was growing



everywhere and what we found beggars belief, as words cannot do justice to how beautiful this place is, not just for the wildflowers but also the general landscape with the cliffs and sea making an amazing back drop.

What I noticed about the plants that they were growing between rocks and close to the ground, as they had adapted to the harsh growing conditions with the strong sea winds they were exposed to. This helped the plants to grow, as it was less windy but moisture was maintain on the leaf surface to maintain suitable growing conditions.

One of the most striking plants that were growing in this area was the *Antirrhinum majus*, a bushy perennial that is traditionally grown as a cut flowers and bedding plant back in the UK. The plant makes it more amazing to see it growing wild in this rocky landscape on the south coast of the Algarve. The main features of this plant are the large pea-shaped, pink flowers that was just blowing back and forth in the wind. Another plant that caught my eye was *Anagallis monelli* that was a carpet of tiny blue star-shaped flowers with and purple center and yellow stamens which looked stunning.

As we moved to the edge of the cliff I spotted one of the most colourful, low growing shrubs I have ever seen, the *Stauracanthus genistoides* with whole rounded, dense growing habit covered in yellow pea-shaped flowers. The leaves are spines that are glaucous coloured and enhance the yellow flowers.

The one plant that I saw the most of growing in this amazing landscape was *Silene colorata*, a tiny annual that produces stunting pink flowers with deeply notched petals. To top the journey off we also spotted another wild orchid, *Ophrysomeg aifera* on the road side and growing in the sandy soil. Cape St. Vincent was one of the most naturally beautiful with colourful and eye catching wild flowers that combines with a breath taking landscape. I makes me appreciate what a fantastic display mother nature can



produce and I feel that it is something that us gardeners would find hard to replicate. I told my fellow PGG trainees that they could leave me here until the wild flowers had finished flowering but unfortunately all good things have to come to an end.

I then drove our trusted Berlingo to our final destination which was Faro airport where we were greeted by Rosie for the last time. I could not thank Rosie enough for all she has done for the five of us. I feel like I learned a lot from her wild flowers tours and I think the Mediterranean Gardening Association do a fantastic job of promoting wild flora and suitable gardening and I wish them all the best for the future.

Now all there was left to do was the 2 hour and a half flight back to London Heathrow and the hour and half back to Waddesdon. I had time to reflect on what a fantastic time I'd had, seen amazing people and how much I have learned but at 1.30 a.m. all I wanted was to go to bed and sleep.

## **Conclusion**

How can I put into words how inspiring this trip has been and it has exceeded any pre-trip expectations that I had. What this trip has done it has opened my eyes to the wide range of wild flora that the Algarve has to offer and despite the dry winter that has caused the wild flower displays to not look at their best. This has only whetted my appetite and gave me more reason to revisit the Algarve in future.

The wildflowers both big and small were amazingly beautiful plants in very different growing environments that most people would simply walk or drive by and I can tell you that they are missing out.

I also learnt how important water saving is needed for such a warm and dry climate like the Algarve. I really admire that the Mediterranean Gardening Association is raising awareness to locals and UK residents. It has made me aware how important it is to pick plants that work with the climate and requires less water and how these plants adapt to the environment with waxy, hairy, grey coloured and smaller leaves and low growing habits are many ways that these clever plants reduce water loss.

It is great that Marilyn Medina Ribeiro has shown us how these plants can be used in formal gardens and that there are alternatives to lawn which require too much water and are not sustainable. It was also fantastic to get involved in the very early stages of the development and planning of the new botanical garden at Quinta de Figueirinha and I wish Dr. Gerhard Zabel the best possible luck with this massive project that will take quite some time to develop but it will be fantastic if it all comes together.

This has been an experience that I will never forget not just for the stunning plants, landscapes and gardens I have seen over the trip but for the amazing people I have met along the way and the four other PGG trainees (Rob, Jo, Becky and Dagmar). I have shared this adventure with a brilliant group of people.

The only real regret from this whole trip is that because of the amount of trips and site seeing that we all did, I never got to use the swimming pool.

### **Acknowledgement**

I would like to firstly thank the Merlin Trust for giving the funding to make the amazing trip possible and without the Professional Garden's Guild (PGG) informing me that this kind of funding is available. If this trip was not funded we might of never had the opportunity and I think the trust is doing a fantastic job of the financial support to young and new horticulturists.

John Humphries who is the President of the PGG who had a massive part in organising the trip and contacting the Mediterranean Gardening Association (MGA) and Rosie Peddle the Secretary at MGA took us on some amazing wildflower walks and gave us a great insight to the native flora that grows on the Algarve and their growing conditions and the other members of the MGA giving up their time to show us around there privet gardens. So thank you very much to you all.