

Climate Change Adaption in Southwest Gardens

Merlin Trust Bursary Report



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Introduction

For my project, I explored how gardens across southwest England are responding to the effects of climate change and how the approaches they are using could help shape the future of horticulture. I wanted to understand how changing weather patterns are already affecting gardens and what practical steps can be taken to make planting and garden management more resilient. To support my research, I used climate projections from the 3Keel Future Climate Model (2023), focusing on RHS Garden Wisley, and compared these predictions with what I observed during visits to **RHS Garden Rosemoor, the Eden Project, The Lost Gardens of Heligan, Trebah Garden, Tresco Abbey Garden, Dartmoor**, and a traditional **Japanese Garden**.

During my visits, I focused on the different ways each garden is adapting to changes such as warmer and wetter winters, followed by hotter and drier summers. I looked closely at the plants being grown, how water was being managed, and the sustainable methods being used to reduce the impact of climate change. I was particularly interested in the use of drought-tolerant and climate-resilient plants, as well as how gardens are dealing with changes to flowering times, longer growing seasons, and increased risks from pests and diseases.

Visiting a range of different gardens allowed me to see that there is no single approach to dealing with climate change. Each site has its own environment, soil conditions, landscape, planting style, and management requirements, meaning that different strategies are more suitable in different situations. Comparing these approaches helped me understand the importance of selecting plants that are suited to future conditions rather than relying solely on traditional planting choices.

I also considered how climate adaptation can be achieved without losing the character and identity of a garden. Although resilience is becoming increasingly important, gardens still need to provide ecological benefits, support biodiversity, and maintain their horticultural and aesthetic qualities. Overall, my project aimed to identify the plant choices, management techniques, and sustainable practices that could help gardens cope with future climate conditions while continuing to be attractive, productive, and environmentally valuable places.

Itinerary

Day 1 — Friday 1st May 2026

Depart Wisley at 2pm, collect the hire car and drive approximately four hours to RHS Rosemoor. Arrive around 6pm and stay locally overnight.

Day 2 — Saturday 2nd May 2026

Guided tour of Rosemoor at 10am with Curator Jonathan Webster, exploring RHS management and regional horticultural practice. Afterwards, drive to Dartmoor National Park and camp overnight.

Day 3 — Sunday 3rd May 2026

Full day exploring Dartmoor and its approach to landscape management, conservation and native planting. Meet with park rangers to discuss management and the impact of recent camping legislation. Camp overnight on site.

Day 4 — Monday 4th May 2026

Travel to The Japanese Garden in St Mawgan for a tour with a senior gardener, focusing on Japanese garden design and architecture. Continue to the Eden Project area and stay locally overnight.

Day 5 — Tuesday 5th May 2026

Full day at the Eden Project, including a private tour of the biomes and a meeting with Peter Jones about the future of horticulture at Eden. Stay locally overnight.

Day 6 — Wednesday 6th May 2026

Visit The Lost Gardens of Heligan for a 10am tour with Head of Gardens Nicola Bradley, followed by a private tour of Trebah Garden with Head Gardener Darren Dickey from 1–4:30pm.

Day 7 — Thursday 7th May 2026

Travel to Penzance for the 9am ferry to Tresco. Meet the garden team and tour the Abbey Garden with Head Gardener Andrew Lawson. Camp overnight on Bryher.

Day 8 — Friday 8th May 2026

Spend the day working alongside Andrew and the Tresco garden team, gaining hands-on experience. Return to Bryher to camp overnight.

Day 9 — Saturday 9th May 2026

Continue practical work and discussions with the Tresco team before taking the 4pm ferry back to the mainland. Stay near The Garden House.

Day 10 — Sunday 10th May 2026

Visit The Garden House and Wildside Gardens for tours with senior gardeners (confirmation pending). Afterwards, begin the journey back to Wisley, bringing together ideas and inspiration from the trip.

At each garden, I asked a similar set of questions about how they are tackling climate change, allowing me to compare different approaches, understand their reasoning and

assess the results. As we travelled further southwest, the climate became noticeably milder, particularly in the Isles of Scilly. While most gardens experienced lower summer temperatures than Wisley, they received significantly more rainfall, making their approaches to collecting and reusing water particularly interesting.



Throughout the trip, I saw a range of sustainable practices. At Heligan, heritage Tamworth pigs are used for land clearance, helping to manage succession while reducing fossil fuel use and providing a safer alternative to machinery on steep terrain. At the Eden Project, I saw sustainability applied on a much larger scale, including electric vehicles, an Olympic-sized reservoir and on-site springs providing year-round water independence. They also use Roul-Roul birds for natural pest control, grow food for their kitchens, produce all plants sold through their retail operation, and use geothermal energy to heat the biomes and nursery, reducing their reliance on fossil fuels.

Seeing these approaches first-hand gave me a greater understanding of how gardens can adapt their practices to their individual climates, landscapes and resources.

This project highlighted to me how important it is for gardens to evolve alongside our changing climate. Climate considerations are increasingly influencing planting, garden

design and long-term development. While we cannot reverse rising temperatures, we can make more sustainable choices through careful water use, choosing the right plant for the right place, and reducing unnecessary intervention.

Many of the gardens we visited had been affected by Storm Goretti, with trees uprooted and damage caused to surrounding planting. Some of these trees had even survived the 1987 storm, highlighting how extreme weather events are becoming more challenging. This made me consider which plants and trees can withstand increasingly severe weather, as well as the importance of working safely in these conditions.



View over the gardens at Tresco, Isles of Scilly. Including flora such as Echium, Gladioli, Aloe arborescens, Phormium tenax, Araucaria heterophylla.

A key theme throughout the trip was the importance of experimentation. Many gardens are looking further afield for suitable plants, particularly from Mediterranean regions, Oceania and South America. As summers become drier and water becomes more precious, using plants suited to their environment and requiring less intervention will become increasingly important.

I also found that planting diversity was seen as essential for building resilience. We cannot simply copy the planting palettes of warmer climates, as the UK's future weather patterns will be unique and unpredictable. Instead, growing a diverse range of plants will help gardens adapt to changing conditions and become more resilient in the long term.



Budget Breakdown

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Travel	Ferry	£800
	Car Hire	£450
	Fuel	£150
	Car Parking	£50
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Subsistence	Accommodation	£1,000
	Food	£1,200
Total		£3,650

Acknowledgements

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