



Gardens & Landscapes of Portugal

On project

Creating an Algarvean Native Garden

Marilyn Medina Ribeiro

Hapimag Resort Albufeira, a four-star resort in southern Portugal, is 11 hectares of low-rise apartment buildings, lawns and subtropical shrubs. However, all this is changing: we have just embarked on a project to transform the water-hungry landscaping into a drought-resistant garden, using only native plants and sustainable maintenance methods. For a public landscape in a tourist town, this is a revolutionary idea. Many people consider the plants on our lists no better than scrub, but we hope to show that the obliging evergreen *Lentisc* bush, thriving in summer without water or fertiliser, is more beautiful than a tropical shrub struggling against the summer heat and processed water of the irrigation system. With thousands of square metres winter-planted with shrubs, perennials and climbers alongside mature olive trees, carobs and umbrella pines, the garden is well on its way to establishment, and we are turning the idea of hotel landscaping on its head.

Algarve, southern Portugal. For many (including myself, before I had been here), the word “Algarve” is synonymous with golf courses, towerblock aparthotels and identikit ice-cream-coloured villas. But, as with many resorts, its fame as an over-developed, package-holiday-hell is largely undeserved. Many MGS members have perhaps had the epiphany. Taking off to one of these locations as a last-minute, budget break in the sun, the place surprises, delights and ultimately bewitches us into staying there.

My case was a little different. In 2008, I accepted a job gardening here, based on 48 hours in July for an interview and brief tour of seaside town Lagos – and I confess, this initial visit lived up to my preconceptions – narrow streets overcrowded with grumpy, sunburned jobs and screaming children. I decided I could overlook these points, however, in view of where I would be working – the manicured garden of a clifftop boutique hotel. When I returned to start work in mid-September, the crowds had calmed, but the weather was still balmy as the best August in England, day after day. The air was full of the scent of ripe figs, oleander blossom, and pine sap toasting in the sun. Suddenly, it began to make sense.

As I quickly discovered, there are some particular treasures the Algarve retains. The coastline and beaches are a good place to start, and not only for the swimming and sunbathing. Here, we are mediterranean with a small “m”: strong winds all through the year and the Atlantic ocean violently lashing the rocks in winter. The beaches are often surrounded by breathtaking rock formations that have been shaped by this sea, and both dune and clifftop harbour diverse plant communities. On the way to Cape St. Vincent, the furthest southwest point in Europe, wave upon wave of brilliantly flower-starred tapestries cover the rolling plains in Spring; it is a sight to time visits around. But there is

much to admire year-round in the harmonious compositions of greys, greens and silvers; a tussocky, hummocky loveliness made up of frequently gardenworthy plants.

Fast-forward to early 2010. Following some disappointments in the first job, I have started as Garden Manager at Hapimag Resort Albufeira. Perched on the cliffs away from the bustle and blaring lights of Albufeira centre, Hapimag is surrounded by a conservation area thick with native plants and the other species which rely on them. *Cistus* abound – especially common are *Cistus albidus*, *C. crispus* and *C. salviifolius*, proof against both the winter’s withering, whipping winds and the pounding sun of midsummer. Annual wildflowers abound, especially peas and thistles. *Cynara humilis* is humble only in the sense that it is shorter than its cousin

C. cardunculus, the cardoon – it still makes a statement with imposing, electric blue flowers and sculptural spiky leaves. *Eryngiums* flower in midsummer, accompanied by the complimentary sulphur-yellow of *Helichrysums* and rhyming with the now-dried seed-heads of the annuals and grasses. *Lagurus ovatus*, *Brizas* large and small, and the fascinating starbursts of *Aegilops geniculata* are personal favourites.



Lavandula luisieri with Spanish Festoon butterfly

All of this is undoubtedly lovely, but when the resort was constructed in 1994, it needed an instant garden. As is still very often the case, roll upon roll of turf was laid, a few mature palm trees (“reassuringly expensive”?) were dotted about, and the reliable year-round colour of *Bougainvillea* and *Hibiscus* enlisted. I have no problem with any of these, per se (except perhaps the lawn), but in this garden, you could be anywhere in the subtropical world – south Africa, Dubai, China, Italy, California – while the more subtle beauty of the local native plants is overlooked. It also looks almost exactly the same day in, day out: not a problem for the week-long package holidaymakers, but many of Hapimag’s clients stay for a month or more, especially in the winter. Undoubtedly most damning of all, however, is the cost, to the company pocket and to the environment, of maintaining such a garden. To deal with local conditions – thin, stony, soils, powerful heat and wind – subtropical plants have to be on permanent life support. Apart from the chemical fertilizers and pesticides keeping the plants alive but utterly sanitized, some lawns were using around 10m³ of water, per night. With the cost of this water rising to over €1,50 per cu-

bic metre in recent years, it became increasingly obvious to the management that another way should be sought.

Thus the experts, landscape architect Claudia and biologist Udo Schwarzer, were invited to propose alternatives. During extensive surveys of the garden and its surroundings, they discovered that Hapimag is surrounded by a fascinating, biodiverse ecosystem, including one plant community in particular that appears to be unique within the Iberian peninsula. Containing, among others, wild carob trees, *Ceratonia siliqua*, the periwinkle *Vinca difformis* and the rather vicious sarsaparilla, *Smilax aspera* var. *altissima*, this combination of plants indicates a relict natural carob wood and is only seen again on the North African coast. It is fascinating to think that our little pocket of land could have been, at one time, connected to that vegetation.

After this consultation with the “genius of the place”, a revolutionary, yet obvious, conclusion was drawn – go back to nature. The new Hapimag garden would be planted exclusively with native species from the Algarve coast. The landscape architects developed their plans rigorously, utilizing a few fundamental matrices of plants which would be employed in given areas, depending on the specific conditions of soil, neighbouring species, light and shade in each situation. These choices, based on combinations of species found in the wild, should ensure that the new plant communities will not just survive in their situation, but thrive and become quickly self-sufficient.



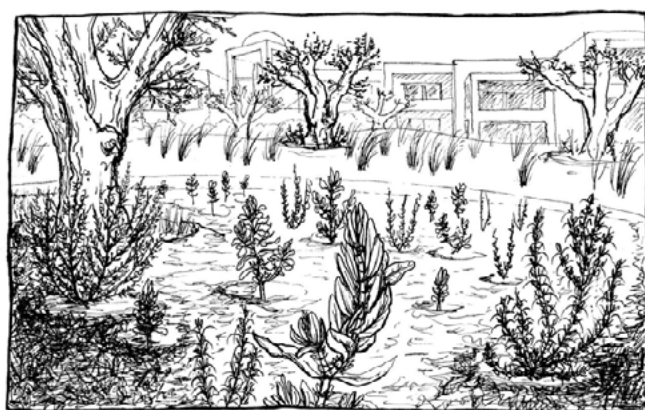
Ophrys apifera coming into bloom

So far, so good – but now we had to find a source for the plants. This remains one of the biggest challenges of constructing a garden using drought-resistant plants in Portugal. Some species are mail-ordered from Spain and France, others we can only obtain by producing ourselves via seed or cuttings. Native plants in particular are viewed, it seems, as weeds and beneath the gardener’s attention (though I have also considered the possibility that the continued use of wall-to-wall lawns and thirsty exotic shrubs is a conspiracy, perpetuated by irrigation suppliers and technicians to keep themselves in business...).

One thing that was, and is, available in abundance is the olive tree. Ours, most of them between 60 and 100 years old, had been unceremoniously grubbed out of an orchard some 200km north of Hapimag, and would have gone on the bonfire if they did not find new homes, so I like to think we did a good deed as well as getting a good price. However, the planting of the trees was a baptism of fire for the project and for me; my first weeks in the job were spent overseeing the arrival and safe conveyance of the trees to their new homes. Being such large creatures, this entailed the use of heavy machinery. The ex-lawns where the olives are planted were full of irriga-

tion pipes which were comprehensively destroyed by the JCBs, to the great consternation of colleagues and guests alike. At the time, this all felt incredibly destructive and dramatic, but has become symbolic of the process and the point of this project: it was a statement of intent; we are staking our hopes on a completely irrigation-free garden.

Although we experimented in a couple of places with drip-line irrigation, what has proved to be more successful is watering by hand with a hose, as infrequently but as thoroughly as possible. We create basins around each plant to catch as much water as possible and send it directly where it is needed – to the plant’s own roots, and not to the neighbouring weeds. We go round no more than once a week in the height of summer (July and August), leaving two or three weeks or a month between waterings in the autumn. Once plants are established, they will receive no extra water whatsoever, relying on rainfall as they do in nature.



Young plants of *Cistus albidus* and *Rosmarinus officinalis*, with the ornamental grass *Hyparrhenia hirta* and mature olive trees beyond

That Spring, we planted our first few patches of Algarve coastal mix, including our various *Cistus* species, rosemary in profusion, *Asteriscus maritimus*, *Phlomis purpurea*, and *Lavandula luisieri*. More shaded areas received evergreen shrubs – *Pistacia lentiscus*, *Jasminum fruticans*, *Rhamnus alaternus*, *Phillyrea angustifolia*. A few key native trees – mostly the umbrella pine *Pinus pinaster* and carob, *Ceratonia siliqua* – joined the olives. Much of the space between the trees has been left to grow as wildflower meadow, where we had many pleasant surprises. Ground orchids such as *Serapias lingua*, *Ophrys apifera* and *Ophrys speculum* appeared in unexpected places, indicating that the original soil and seed bank had not been too greatly altered during the years of the conventional garden. Over the course of the summer, seedheads dry out and bleach to shades of flaxen and bone, becoming a textural, sculptural feast for the eyes, especially when backlit by golden evening light. By the time the first rains arrive in autumn, the plants have had the chance to drop their seeds and we give the meadow its annual cut.

During the last two winters, we have continued to refine and expand the mixture of species and the number of square metres given over to native plantings. We have added to the wildflower meadows with seeds gathered locally. *Chrysanthemum coronarium*, various euphorbias, the pinky-mauve thistle *Galactites tomentosa* and a bright violet *Echium* are star performers, creating a delightfully



Dried seedheads dance in the evening sunlight: Bellardia trixago, Lagurus ovatus and Trifolium angustifolium

zingy palette from mid-February often until the end of June. We have built a composting area and the garden waste which, in the past, was taken off site at great expense, is now composted or shredded and returned to the garden as mulch. The difference this makes to the texture, temperature and water-retaining capacity of our frequently sandy soil is evident almost immediately.

As you might imagine, there are those who do not appreciate this picture. Some look out on a wildflower meadow and see an abandoned wasteland; see our tiny plug-plants struggling in the sun and think we must be doing something wrong. It is an understandable reaction, particularly from those who were almost certainly expecting to see bright green lawn and exotic flowers when they arrived at their hotel. But it is testament to the authenticity, common sense and obvious health of this way of gardening that the response from clients has in fact been overwhelmingly positive. And when, a couple of short years from now, the garden has matured and begins to possess its full beauty, the case for going native will be unignorable.

Marilyn Medina Ribeiro trained initially as a graphic designer at Camberwell College of Arts in London, working in design during and after her studies. However, the tube journey and workdays spent in a basement office quickly lost their glamour and a move to the Ashdown Forest in Kent followed, reawakening her childhood love of plants. A BSc in Landscape Management at Hadlow College came next, along with work in specialist nurseries and as a craft gardener and planting designer. In 2008 she moved to Portugal where, apart from finding some very interesting gardens to explore and to work in, she met and married her husband. They live in Lagos, west Algarve.