



Gardens & Landscapes of Portugal

On projects

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.



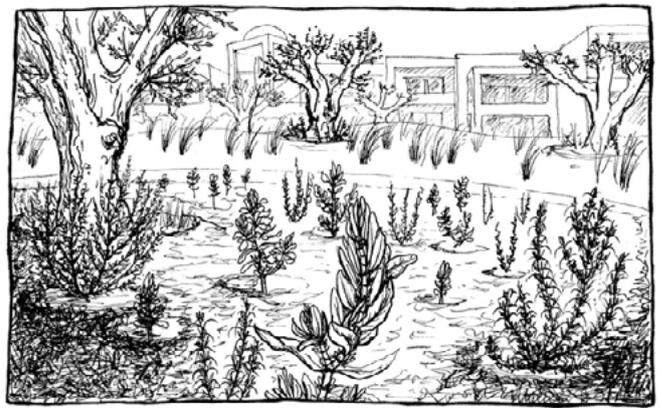
Ophrys apifera coming into bloom

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.



LOURENÇO E SILVA, ANDRÉ, *Conservação e Valorização do Património. Os embrechados do Paço das Alcáçovas*, Lisboa: Esfera do Caos Editores, 2012, 331 pp.

Reviewed by Maria Alexandra Trindade Gago da Câmara
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In his work, the author approaches the study of the Paço das Alcáçovas rock-work, making a different, new proposition and study, on the 'in context' domain of Decorative Arts. Based on his Master's thesis on Interior Preservation and Rehabilitation, presented to the Decorative Arts School of the Ricardo do Espírito Santo Silva Foundation, in Lisbon, the final outcome of this unique and original research, which must be continued is now published – with the approval of the Regional Cultural Board of the Alentejo.

The title leads us to a double feature: the study of the rock-work, specifying a case study, and, simultaneously, the focus on the preservation and appreciation of this artistic heritage.

As a matter of fact, this double feature implies a strong interconnection, permanently emphasised throughout the work.

When we examine both the table of contents and the theme, we see that the work translates several concerns at different moments. We see that the author feels the need to suggest three structuring elements for his book: the first part gives the historical content and the theme of the rock-work study from the European context to the national context.

The second part is a specific approach focused on the studied object – the Garden and the Chapel of the Paço das Alcáçovas – suggesting an artistic approach to the commission and its iconographic program, as well as the treatise influence, along with the site's and the surrounding environment's material on the architectural piece.

Lastly, the third part begins with a diagnose and an assessment of its current preservation state, suggesting contributions, as well as recommendations for an intervention methodology.

The text is well structured and fluent, graphically light, and well documented with unprecedented images, figures, and documents, making the theme easier to read and understand.

Also to be emphasised is the useful glossary and the significant sets still in existence in continental Portugal, comprised in a long time arch, between the 16 and 20 centuries.

In his book, André Lourenço da Silva gives us several work indications and also:

The commented and contextualised analysis of this text leads us to question of the rock-work relevant role over the course of the Portuguese gardens' art and their excellent aesthetic value, implying the cultural environment, as well as the aesthetic currents, which have influenced these sets. The author saved one of the most notable residential architecture buildings in the south of Portugal from oblivion, placing it on a quality cultural tourism itinerary.

Seduced by this bright material symbiosis, the author has depicted a correct intervention strategy on this set.

To conclude, it's important to make note that this book takes us on a journey, inside an artistic universe known and studied by few people in Portugal. Although he has no basic scientific training in the domain of Art History, André Lourenço e Silva is able to master with dedication and intuition the proposed methodological corpus, decoding and analysing the meanings, the influences, the materials, and the techniques used in the artistic set.

Therefore, and in so many other ways, this is a book of happy encounters between different domains: Art History, as well as the preservation and study of materials.

Now, the scientific community is expected to take on the challenge set by André Lourenço, by exploring and continuing his study. 'This is, indeed, an open subject' (p.254).

CARNEIRO, JOSÉ MANUEL MARTINS, *O Imaginário Romântico da Pena*, Lisboa: Chaves Ferreira Publicações S.A., 2009, 287 pp.

Reviewed by Filomena Serra
IHA/EAC-FCSH

The publication of *O Imaginário Romântico da Pena*, issued in 2009 under the patronage of the Municipality of Sintra, appeals to the general reader's attention not only because of its contents but also due to its large number of enlightening pictures and nice layout. However, the lettering is difficult to read and we feel the lack of a name's index that would guide the reader through the pages. The study is the result of an academic work presented by its author, José Manuel Martins Carneiro, as an MA dissertation conducted at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Lisbon.

The Palace of Sintra and its Park are considered one of the most important symbols of Portuguese artistic Romanticism but they have been studied and interpreted throughout the times in quite a dispersed way. Instead, the author meant this book to be more than a study of artistic heritage; in fact, he wants it to function as an interdisciplinary work covering the whole subject of the Pena complex.

The author's concept of «romantic imagery» encompasses the three constructions in spite of their distinct values. Supported by extensive documentary sources, the analysis includes the Palace itself; the Park, which consists of a diversified set of buildings and properties that the German duke Ferdinand of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha went on acquiring during the mid-19th century in order to create there the first landscaped garden in Portugal, according to the romantic taste inspired by the knowledge of the various arts, from painting to poetry and opera; and finally, the so-called «Moorish Castle» which he had restored.

The volume is well organized. After an historical and methodological introduction, the author seeks to establish the premises that guided the research at the same time that he introduces the reader to the cultural mindset in which this romantic works were conceived. Indeed, Ferdinand was born in Vienna in 1816 and came to Lisbon in 1836 to become the King consort of Queen Mary of Portugal. His importance justifies the attention dedicated to him as patron of the arts and artists, as well as restorer of many national monuments. He also proved to be a skilled politician and a defender of the Portuguese cultural heritage, putting his enlightened imprint on the culture of the 19th century in Portugal during the long period of consolidation of the constitutional régime.

Throughout the pages we are introduced to the worldview of this German «King-artist», who gave Portugal the idea of nature as a subject of reflection and enjoyment, and not just of aesthetic contemplation and imitation. The book presents the German romantic philosophy in a detailed way in order to show that such philosophy

recognizes sensitivity and feeling as fundamental categories. Therefore, the whole Pena complex is the result of a mentality and a program. It is the Germanic cultural world that is at its origins; a world where music, poetry, singing and opera, but equally botany, mineralogy and geology intersect. It inspires a careful plan developed during several decades. Diversified zones and circuits were built and scenic solutions were found to the different terrain accidents as well as the natural landscape.

Behind the Pena complex is one *Natürphilosophie*, which corresponds to theosophical principles, godly revelations and the discovery of visible and invisible realities. According to the author of the study, it is in this perspective that applied scientific knowledge acquires a religious significance, while the walker's creative imagination expresses itself through the iniciatic pathways to the Park and Palace of Pena. Imagery and representation forms merge with the whole construction of the Palace, where the Baron Von Eschewege, a mining engineer, made his mark as an amateur architect. In addition, the study's author also highlights the history of the restoring of the Hyeronimite convent and the Moorish castle, as well as the gardens. Architecture and ornament extended to the landscape following the composition principles of the outside spaces. The author also points out the relationship between Goethe's *Elective Affinities* and the gardens of Pena as well as role played by the French gardener Bonnard after designing the Necessidades Park in Lisbon where he formed a school of gardeners. Scenography and afforestation have created Pena as a poetic of space and time. Among multiple possible readings, the author interprets the garden landscape as a voyage. It is a seductive intertextual reading which connects forms and symbols.