THE HIGHLIGHTS | VOLUME1 | ISSUE NO.1|

Portugal 2025



THE FUTURE OF GARDENING?

We visit some amazing dry gardens. Also checking out the native flora of the Algarve

5 Amazing days of study

NO MORE WATERING

The Ultimate Guide to the PGG Portugal Trip



ORCHIDS

Every where

PORTUGAL 2025

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ORCHID MANIA

MONDAY - A VISIT TO A RARE UNDISTURBED FIELD OF ORCHIDS

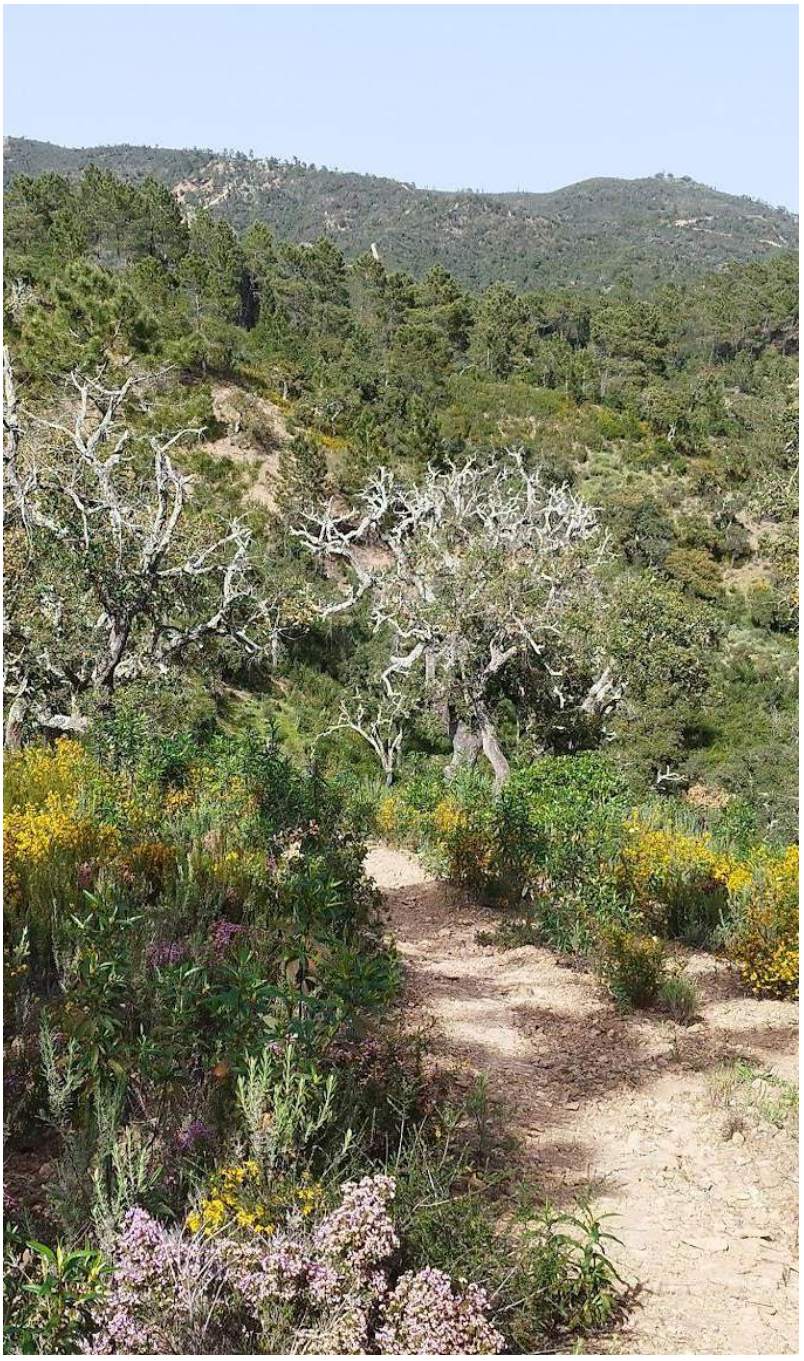


On Sunday, Peter Eames, Oliver Neale and I (Tim Gait) met Rosie and Robert Peddle of MGAP, who kindly organised this study trip for third year PGG trainees.

On Monday we went to visit Caroline & John Nicolas, who live in nearby Corotelo and have land which they have deliberately left undisturbed for twenty years. Most properties bulldoze the land around the house, scraping off the topsoil and leaving it a blank slate on which people can build their garden. But they left their land untouched and as a result it is a haven for wild orchids, which grow well in the 'Barrocal' region, between the coast and the hills.

I saw more orchids than I've seen in my whole life. We stepped daintily to admire plants such as the 'naked man' orchid, a frilly light pink flower which the lobed lip of the flower looks like a naked man. There was also *Ophrys speculum* (Mirror Orchid) with which looks like a large shiny bee and *Ophrys scolopax* (Woodcock bee orchid, pictured above). Orchids like poor, undisturbed soil, they are quite fussy and cannot be transplanted. We also had a look at the old orchard where there were almonds, figs, olives and carob trees, all staples of the region.

Later we walked in the maquis where eucalyptus trees are grown for pulp often used in toilet tissue. They evolved to fuel wildfires to burn off competition. Their bark peels and makes a ready-to-go bonfire. There were also many cork oak trees, Portugal is the world's leading producer of cork. You could see where workers have skillfully peeled off the thicker layer around the trunk and left it on where it is thinner further up.



NATURE'S GARDEN

NATURAL SELECTION

We ventured further up into the hills where the vegetation actually resembled a planned mediterranean dry garden with a patchwork of Arbutus shrubs (smaller than in English gardens), Gum rock rose, lavender, ulex and euphorbia.



Peter admiring the view



IRRIGATION FREE

TUESDAY -TALKING TO A GARDEN DESIGNER WHO HAS MOVED INTO GARDENS THAT DON'T REQUIRE ANY IRRIGATION

We visited Lutz Blenderman who runs local landscape garden company REGASTOP, formerly REGATOP (REGA means irrigation). He explained that since water shortages and government restrictions mean traditional gardens are no longer viable, he has moved into dry gardens. He has studied dry gardens extensively and recommended Olivier Filippi's books. He gave us a tour of his own garden and showed us where he has extended borders to reduce lawn, and used grass alternatives like french clover, which is more drought tolerant. He even gave us a handy list of all the plants in his dry garden which included many cistus shrubs, as well as grasses like stipa. He was also a big proponent of *Lavandula dentata* (french lavender). Some areas that were formerly lawn are now replaced with gravel or stones planted up with beautiful palms, calocephalus and agaves, underscored with mypex to prevent weeds. No lawn has the added advantage of not getting grass strimmings in the pool! The garden was beautiful, relaxing to be in and the bees were loving it too.

Later, Lutz showed us some gardens he's been working on in the area. Vale de Lama was a

Instant effect ancient olive trees garden hack

challenge as they wanted all low-growing plants so they could see the view of the golf course. *Rosmarinus officinalis* 'Prostratus' worked well for this.

I was surprised to see a very old olive tree in this new property. In fact, it had only just been put there. Lutz said olive trees are very easy to transplant. You can buy ones that are hundreds of years old from nurseries and plant them in a new garden for instant effect.



NO, IT'S NOT BINDWEED! CONVULVULUS, BEAUTIFUL & DROUGHT-RESISTANT

Unlike many garden designers, Lutz prefers to maintain his gardens for at least a couple of years after. Other gardeners aren't always used to this style of garden and over-watering can damage drought-tolerant plants.

A highlight of this garden for me was the sprawling convolvulus with its jolly and abundant white flowers. It looks similar to its cousin bindweed, but this was *Convolvulus cneorum*, not *Convolvulus sepium*. There was also Teucrium and various cistus e.g. salvifolia, ladanifer.

We visited two other gardens that Regastop were working on. It was interesting to see the contrast between these and the old-school gardens nearby. I think it is as much a challenge to convince people of the benefits of a dry garden as to actually make the garden!

Behind all three of the gardens were golf courses. According to Portugal News, golf courses in the Algarve use 15 cubic hectometers (100m cubed) of water per year. The region has been in drought since 2022 and reservoirs are down to 8-15%...

The last garden had been planted with drought resistant Bermuda grass. It was spongey to walk on, but it looked fine. You water it only a couple of times a week (not every day like most gardens here). But you water it deeply to encourage deeper root growth. This is a good practice with any watering of dry gardens. The problem with short bursts of sprinklers is that it encourages shallow root growth, so the plants become weak and dependent on the sprinklers. Also, sprinkling plants that are adapted to drought encourages phytophthora (rot).

Looking at the rare and endemic plants of Sagres

CAPE VINCENT

WEDNESDAY - WILD FLOWERS AT THE END OF THE WORLD



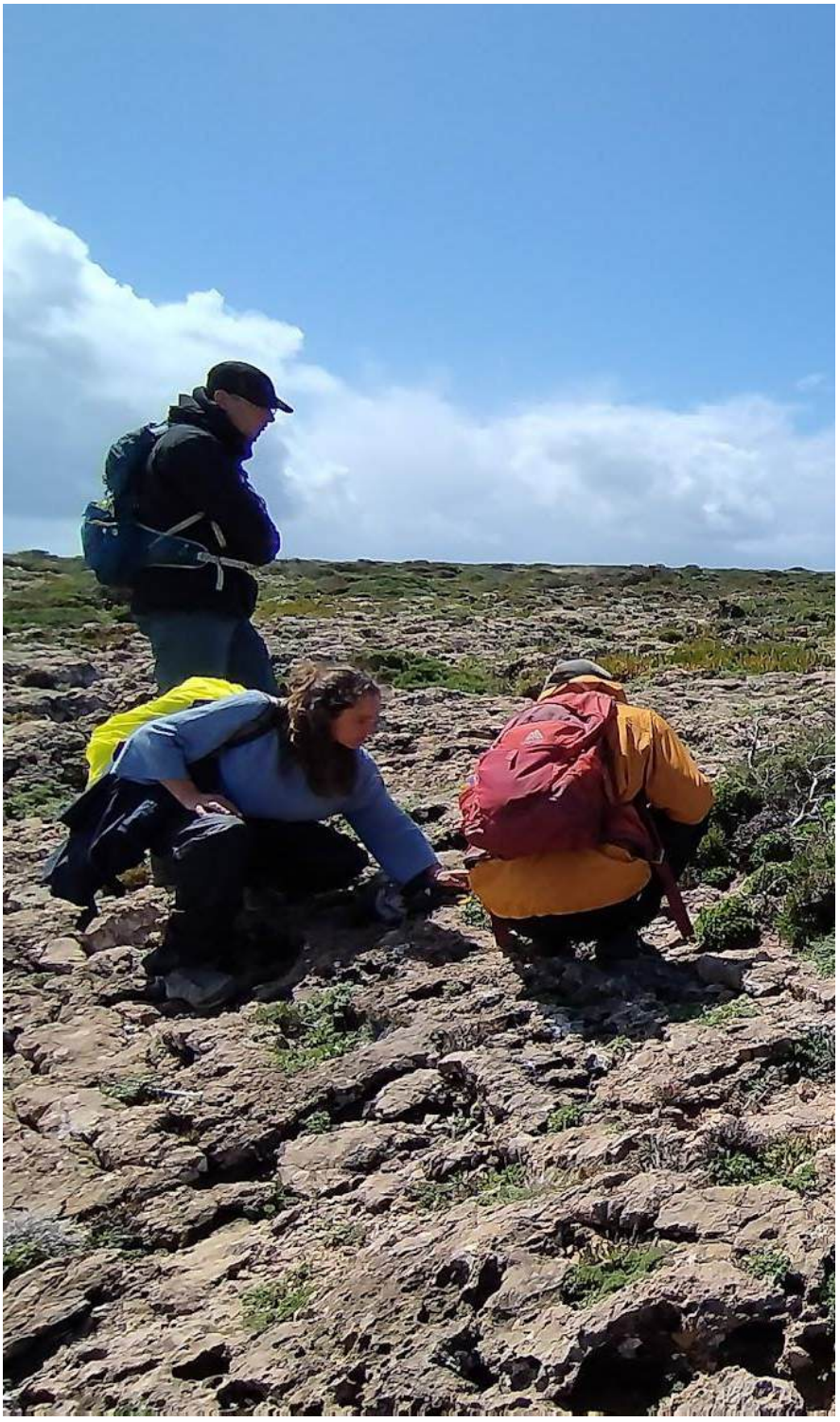
On Wednesday we had a guided tour of Cabo de San Vicente. It is the south west tip of Portugal in the 70,000 hectare Parque Natural do Sudoeste Alentejano e Costa Vicentina. The reserve is a hotspot of biodiversity and rare wild flowers and orchids. There are 12 lusitanic plants exclusive to the park and 4 that are only found at Cape Vincent.

We were lucky enough to visit at just the right time of year, early April, when the landscape is in full bloom. In summer there are more subtle shades of red and brown, which can be aesthetically pleasing in their own right.

Our guide, Ana Carla Cabrita, has a wealth of knowledge, and wrote a book about the plants here. Ana explained how, on the west side the plants all grew very low to protect themselves from the wind. You could see on the north side of the shrubs they were wind-scorched, like they'd been burnt. Even the trees were hunkering down. I saw a very prostrate oak tree, *Quercus coccifera*, about a foot high and a few metres wide; with tiny, spiky leaves. When we moved to a more sheltered area a kilometre further south and inland, it was much warmer and we had to take off our jackets. The shrubs were twice as big, demonstrating how plants adapt to microclimates.

I saw the strange parasitic *Cytinus hypocistus*, it has no leaves or chlorophyll but has special organs to suck water and nutrients out of the roots of plants like cistus. It has a yellow flower which tastes like candy.

The council wanted to build a road across the reserve. but Ana led a peaceful protest and the idea was dropped.



UNIQUE GEOLOGY

EQUALS UNIQUE FLORA

We had to be careful on the cliffs of the southside as they were made of crumbly limestone, whereas less than a kilometre away on the west side they were made of harder dolomite.



Juniper and cistus feature heavily but look closer and there's a lot more



DRY GARDEN

THURSDAY - THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF SETTING UP A NEW DRY GARDEN

Alex & Margot de Bonth, a Belgian couple, have started an ambitious new project to convert their garden into a dry garden, due, in part, to increasing water shortages. They showed us around and explained some of the challenges and benefits. Oxalis grows everywhere, but it's a pretty weed!

The plants were in 'watering basins,' small depressions around the plant to hold the water and feed it to the roots.

One issue is that the rain rushes down the hill, washing away the soil. To prevent this erosion, Alex planted rows of drought tolerant vetivergrass, which keeps the soil together.

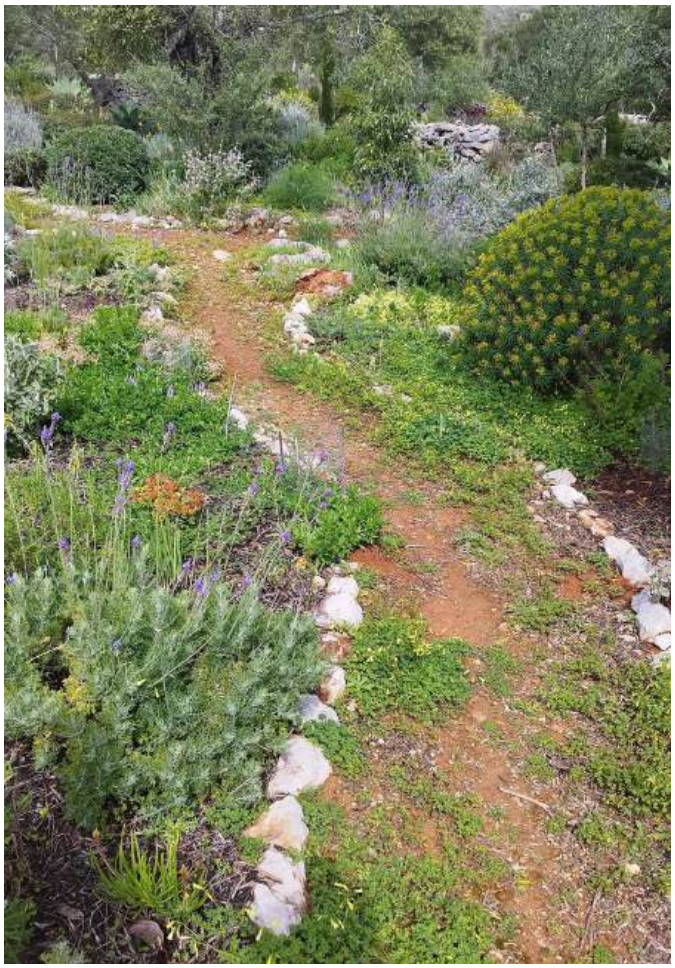
There were cistus, including *albidis* and *montspeliensis*, also junipers, lavenders, iris, helichrysum, euphorbias etc. The garden was designed by local landscape architect Jessica Gomes and the plants sourced locally.

They left a wild area, for bees and other wildlife, but not all wildlife is welcome as the property is surrounded by a high electrified fence to prevent damage from wild boars! There was also a greenhouse, nursery, veg patch and citrus orchard.

Orchid hunting in Fonte de Benemola

We followed the Fonte Benemola Trail which is a local protected landscape in the Barrocal Natura 2000 Site. Its fertile limestone soils support many native wildflowers but today we were on a mission for orchids!

This year was a bumper season for orchids, as was an unusually wet winter, the first for many years.



CUT AND STICK GARDENING; EDITING WHAT'S GROWING THERE ALREADY

With Rosie and Robert we spotted many orchids, e.g. *Orchis italica* - Naked Man Orchid and *Orchis anthropophora*, Man Orchid. (the 'naked man' is pink, the other is yellow.)

We were lucky enough to find the rare *Peony broteroi,* endemic to the Iberian Peninsula that only grows in the hills. The habitat was rich, varied and mostly untouched, but we did see abandoned terraces once used for carob orchards. And near the end of the walk I was shocked to see one hillside had been stripped and rotovated by the council to prevent wildfires, just leaving the trees. Might this actually take moisture out of the landscape?

FRIDAY - GARDEN VISITS & NURSERY

We visited Susan Finlay's dry garden. It was a beautiful naturalistic garden and Susan had an interesting approach; rather than starting from scratch, over many years she has edited what was already there. She hasn't had to buy any plants as she selects the ones she wants and propagates them. Only newly planted plants are watered for the first year, then they have to fend for themselves. The garden is quite random but Susan edits it to her taste, encouraging plants she likes and removing plants that are too brutish. Oliver Fillipi calls it 'bas relief' sculpture!

We followed a meandering path through pruned lavender, euphorbia shrubs-that naturally look topiarised, cistuses with their abundant delicate papery flowers, *Phlomis purpurea* and more. An area at the top was exposed and barren. Susan planted trees as a windbreak and to provide shade to make it more hospitable for other plants. I liked this unique approach to gardening, working with nature. I wonder if it could be applied in English gardens with our native flora?

Climate challenges in a large nursery

In the afternoon we visited Viveiros Monterosa, in Moncarapacho. Propagation Manager Sonia Lopes gave us a guided tour of the biggest nursery I've ever seen—40he and 170 employees. It was a hive of activity. They serve Portugal and have big clients in Germany, Poland etc.



ENCOURAGING PEOPLE TO BUY NATIVE

Set up by three Swedish citizens, the nursery has been going since 1969 and historically specialised in ornamental plants for Europe. But in 1994 they started providing mediterranean plants and in 2000 they continued this trend by providing herbs and succulents.

Now, they are providing more native drought-tolerant plants. But it's a gradual process. You can't take too many big risks like that when so many jobs rely on the company's success.

None-the-less they are quite forward thinking and open to adapting to the challenges of climate change. For example they are moving from sprinklers to drip-irrigation. Also, they use no chemical or synthetic products for pest control and strive for the lowest possible carbon footprint.

We had a look at their new dry garden, by the award-winning organic olive orchard. The dry garden is designed to be a showcase to visitors, to show them that dry gardens with native plants can look great. *Leucophyllum frutescens* (Texas Ranger) was a plant that stood out to me with its ghostly white stems. I also liked the cactus area with *Carnegiea gigantea* as big as trees!

Alfagar Village Extreme Gardening

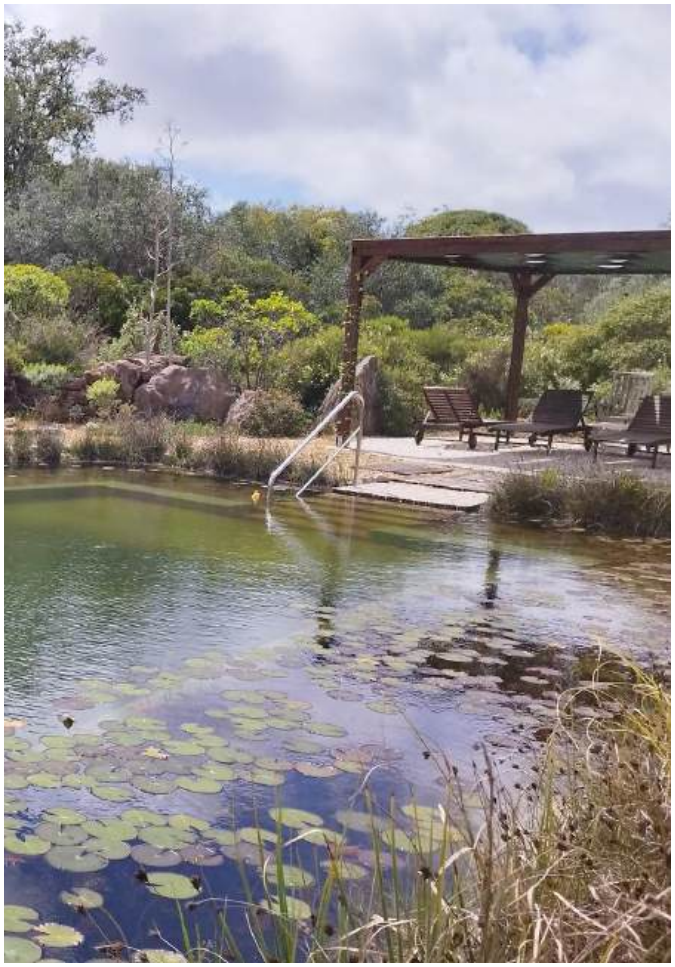
Later, head gardener João-Claudio gave us a tour of the garden at Alfagar Village Hotel Resort.

Since the 2009 landslide the gardeners have been under pressure to shore up the encroaching cliff. João-Claudio explained how he had to abseil down the cliff to plant into the cliffside. They are trying many plants including Stipa, Pistachio, Pines and trying many other plants to prevent erosion. Grasses seem to work particularly well at holding the soil together.

SAVING THE BEST TILL LAST ;)

On the last afternoon we had a look around Rosie and Robert's garden.

Rosie explained how they have no lawn whatsoever now. There's a rustic brick patio which replaced some of the old lawn.



NO LAWNS, NO PROBLEM

Other parts that might have been lawn were replaced with gravel or beds. full of interesting drought-tolerant plants.

I was very impressed by the natural water swimming pool which uses reeds to filter the water and doesn't require any chlorine. It also encourages nature and there's even an old tree where an owl watches for mice every night.

I liked the potted plants too. In this environment, if you want to keep plants that need more water, it is best to keep them in pots near the house. You can use grey water from the shower/sink (with no soap in). Water early morning or night to avoid evaporation.

The cistus were in full flower and provided a colourful display. The garden is cleverly designed to blend into the natural landscape the further back it goes. The tall cypresses give a sense of depth and a touch of elegance.

We watched a lecture by dry gardening guru Olivier Filippi. He explained how there are thousands of diverse drought-tolerant plants from across the world. It's possible to have a beautiful garden all year round without watering at all. We can embrace the structure and rhythm of landscapes in drought areas. He even featured Rosie and Rob's garden!

I found the trip very inspiring and I think that dry gardens are a great solution to problems posed by water shortages and extreme heat, as climate change forces us to rethink the way we garden in the UK. I also like gardens being in harmony with their wider natural environment.

Acknowledgements

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