

The Full Monty

Monty shares lessons learnt from a beautiful, drought-tolerant Grecian garden on how we can adapt to the challenges of climate change



Rule number one when planning

anything from a barbecue at the weekend to a gardening column with a six-week lead time, do not double-guess the weather. However, it is not unreasonable to assume that there will have been some sunshine between me writing these words and you reading them, wherever you are. Gardens will have to deal with heat and drought in some measure, although here at Longmeadow, not once has it been too hot or too dry for me or the garden in the past 30 years.

But I do appreciate that a mere 100 miles or so to the east of here things start to be very different. Most of East Anglia gets about 620mm of rain a year compared with our 1,000mm.

Summer drought is a growing problem for many gardeners. But every problem is an opportunity. The best way to deal with this is to embrace its possibilities. In May, I paid a firming visit to Greece, where climate change really does mean drier, hotter conditions. The week I was there, the temperature was in the mid-30°Cs and it had

“You have to adapt and work with what is happening to your garden rather than fight it.”

been the driest winter and spring ever recorded. The ground was as parched as it usually is in August, and the landscape bleached and barren.

Yet the gardens of the wealthy-sported

eternal-green grass – a glaring symbol of both

horticultural and human folly. However, I was

visiting the marvellous garden at Sparoza, near

Athens, made by Jacqueline Tyrwhitt in the 1960s-

70s, carried on and developed as a climate-

compatible garden by Sally Razeau from 1992 to

her death earlier this year, and now gardened by

the knowledgeable and enthusiastic Lucie Willart.

The result is an exceptionally beautiful garden,

although much remains hostile to cultivation,

Lucie told me that Tyrwhitt used dynamite to

blast planting holes for trees and anything that

she herself plants needs a pickaxe rather than

a spade. Only a small part of it is irrigated, yet

almost all of it is beautiful.

The first key to making a garden in these

conditions is, as ever, the right choice of plants.

Tyrwhitt delicately set out to make what was

the first truly Mediterranean garden by observing

the plants immediately around her, in the Athica region. Some Mediterranean plants survive by growing and flowering in autumn, winter or spring and having summer dormancy – with some, such as *Teucrium*, shedding their leaves, which then regrow in autumn. Others adapt in form and habit with leaves that are silvery, downy, narrow or glossy to help reduce water loss. Quite a few will live less long or even die if watered too much in summer.

Sparoza was brave from the start in trusting the plants to cope with extreme conditions rather than making the mistake of so many of us, in thinking that plants can only survive or thrive with our assistance. We overwater, overfeed and over-fuss, rather than letting them get on with what they have evolved to do perfectly well in conditions of drought. It is always best to

plant in autumn rather than spring, so plants can get the benefit of winter rains in their first growing season. At Sparoza, they have found it is far better to plant small and let plants establish in situ rather than making an immediate effect. Propagation is done using local soil rather than compost so, from day one, a seed or cutting has to adapt and cope. Even though it seems counter-intuitive, it is essential to make sure that the drainage is really sharp – being too wet is almost always a bigger problem than being too

dry. I have found at Longmeadow that my rosemary, lavender, thyme and citrus are always killed by winter wet, and never in any way harmed by drought.

The lessons from Sparoza ripple in every direction, reinforcing that our gardens must be climate-compatible if we want them to remain sustainable and beautiful. At Longmeadow, as far from Sparoza horticulturally as one might imagine, that means adapting to increasing winter wet and spring dry, but every gardener will have their own conditions to deal with. You have to adapt and work with what is happening to your garden rather than fight it.

The green laws of the Mediterranean are not so much a symbol of triumph over nature but of human vanity and folly. Nature always wins so it makes sense to be on her side.

Mark