

Opinion **Gardens**

## Garden lessons from a warm climate

Two Greek gardens show the wisdom of Mediterranean plantings in an age of global warming

**ROBIN LANE FOX**



Succulents at the Mediterranean Garden Society site at Sparoza, on the outskirts of Athens © Harriet Rix

**Robin Lane Fox** JULY 28 2023

In Britain we have had a heavenly month for gardening. The rains have made the soil readily workable. The broken sunlight and shade have shown gardens at their best. Weeds have germinated far more freely than last year, but the conditions have been perfect for hoeing them out, killing several years' seeding at once.

Gardens elsewhere have been scorching in hot weather. If you are setting off for a summer break in the Mediterranean, take time to notice the local planting and not to wish for yet more echoes of green and pleasant Britain. Mediterranean gardening is an art of its own, one with different highs and lows. It is at its most flowery long before British borders and bedding-out. It cannot rely on summer rain. It is worth studying in its own right: more of us will be confronting similar conditions as the climate changes.

A hundred years ago, visiting second-home owners enjoyed Mediterranean gardening at a different time. They did not go off in August hoping to see a garden or two between bouts of sunbathing on the beach. They went to their Riviera homes in November and left in April and early May after enjoying spring flowers galore. If Edwardians went back to the Med in high summer, they covered themselves in face cream and preferred walking in the Alps.

At the start of F Scott Fitzgerald's dark novel, *Tender is the Night*, the scenes of life on the sunny French beach begin by being idyllic. Published in 1934, they were based on the author's own visits to the south of France in the mid-1920s. Seaside life in the modern style was just being discovered then by Americans.

There are two sides to Mediterranean gardening, expatriates' engagement with it and the involvement of those who have always lived in its climate. I have recently explored them at two separate sites near Athens. One is the garden of the Mediterranean Garden Society, the other a botanic garden that began on the grand scale in 1964, long before "native" species and mass tree planting commanded headlines in an age of climatic change.



Lucie Willan in the Mediterranean Garden Society trial garden at Sparoza © Harriet Rix

At Sparoza, in Paiania on the outskirts of Athens, the Mediterranean Garden Society maintains a garden on a big hillside, supported by the Goulandris Museum of Natural History and given over to plants not just from the Mediterranean but from zones with a similar climate. The garden is the living outpost of the society and its members from 38 countries: it is an excellent resource for any gardener in a Mediterranean climate zone.

For an annual €45, subscribers receive a fascinating magazine four times a year, the right to share in a yearly seed exchange and access to the society's much-loved tours, a great way to holiday with keen gardeners.

The Sparoza garden's style and form are indebted to two remarkable ladies, each of whom began to work at it in their early sixties. In the mid-1960s, Mary Jaqueline Tyrwhitt was the pioneer of Mediterranean planting on the site, followed by Sally Razelou, custodian of Sparoza for 30 years, 20 of them under the MGS's custodianship. Since her death in 2021, the head gardener has been Lucie Willan. The garden is enjoying a further resurgence thanks to her dedication and eye. Part of her training was as a member of the gardening team at Sissinghurst: Monty Don has already called in to make a TV film about the garden.

To give you a sense of Mediterranean challenges and potential, I cannot do better than to direct you to a new-ish video, hosted by Willan and accompanied by excellent images of highlights of the garden's year, from prolific January, beginning 9 minutes into the film, to the magnificent bulbs of late autumn, including yellow sternbergias, wild narcissi and Greek cyclamen. Watch "[Lucinda Willan, A Year at Sparoza](#)" on YouTube and enjoy an inspiring tour of what a Mediterranean garden can become. Twenty minutes long, it is pleasantly informal, but be patient as it has excellent images of the bee orchids, fine crocuses, flowering thyme all over the hillside and much else.



A new area of garden created at Philodassiki on Mount Hymettus © Harriet Rix

The contrasts from month to month are unmissable, especially if you are overheating on a family beach holiday. Lavenders and agapanthus take over in high summer, together with buckwheat and the salvias, which Willan has already increased. When she talks about the phrygana, she is referring to the distinctive scrubby bushes of many Greek hillsides: scroll on to 15 minutes into the film and you will see four of the big snakes she encounters, unperturbed, while gardening. Sparoza can be visited only on pre-booked days in groups ([sparozagarden.com](https://sparozagarden.com)), but plants are on sale for those who can take them home.

In the mid-1960s, while Tyrwhitt was starting the Sparoza garden, a massive park and replanting project was beginning on the slopes of Mount Hymettus in Athens. At Philodassiki, its forest and gardens are a tribute to ecologically alert planting and management, difficult though the conditions and maintenance are. The guiding principle has been to show plants native to Greece and the islands, a treasure trove that should not be driven out by mass-marketed bedding plants, often bred in California.

In the 1950s, the famous artist and landscaper Dimitris Pikionis planted the main approach to the Acropolis hill and its temples with native Greek trees and shrubs. Philodassiki followed on, a venture that deserves equal renown. Up to 3mn trees were planted on the deforested slopes of Hymettus, including the Kaisariani monastery-church, and a nursery was devised to grow plants to suit Mediterranean conditions.



*Ebenus cretica*, from Crete, in the Philodassiki Garden on Mount Hymettus © Harriet Rix

The gardens are now a green index of much that is native to Greece, from fine peonies and yellow-flowered hypericums to Cretan ebony, or a rare oak with yellow undersides to its leaves, *Quercus alnifolia*, which I have never seen before. The blue-grey junipers include *Juniperus drupacea*: there is even a grey-leaved stachys from my recent haunt, [Euboea](#). As the labelling is good despite the scale and range of the project, I love walking through this natural database.

“Weeds drive me nuts,” the dynamic genius of the place, Sophia Pilavachi, told me, dismissing siren voices who try to redraw the line between native plants and invasive imports. With the forest scientist Nikolaos Pangas, Pilavachi tends the style and scope of the big collection, opening others’ eyes to its beauty. She pointed me to the many green vistas among plantings of varied height, whether Aleppo pines, cedars or trees called Ceratonia. Green is a colour with many more shades than 50 shades of grey. “It has vividness,” she observes.

Visitors proliferated at Philodassiki during Covid when the nature park was still accessible. Pilavachi has just made a stepped and terraced flower garden too, planting it with tall globe artichokes, salvias, Greek euphorbias and much else to show how bright a Greek garden can be. I draw two conclusions. One is that individual Greeks have long grasped the challenge of thoughtful gardening in a Mediterranean zone. The other is “never try to grow dahlias in Greece”, as Willan aptly told me.

Who cares, once we realise how much there is to grow by going Mediterranean and revising our ingrained garden calendar?

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