

IN BRIEF

What Experimental dry garden, owned by the Goulandris Natural History Museum, that is the headquarters of the Mediterranean Garden Society.

Where 30km east of central Athens, Greece.

Size Four acres.

Soil Alkaline. Intensively gardened areas have mostly the terra rosa soil of the Mesogeian plain over which the garden looks, but the wild hillside above has thin, stony soil.

Climate Mediterranean (long, hot summers; short, rainy winters).

Hardiness zone USDA 9.

Looking north over an experimental area of natives and succulents, where only the toughest plants survive. Mauve-flowered native *Ptilostemon chamaepeuce* grows well in poor soil, while Central American *Yucca elephantipes*, Australian *Brachychiton gregorii* and South African *Aloe maculata* are also notable for their resilience.

The long-lasting, pale-apricot blooms of *Aloe maculata* - one of the toughest of the genus. The distinctive white-speckled rosettes propagate easily and quickly make a good groundcover. It thrives in the driest areas of Sparoza garden.

Tough stuff

A series of dedicated women have transformed a scrubby hillside near Athens into a remarkable, experimental garden filled with resilient Mediterranean plants from all over the world

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Just east of Athens, overlooking the Mesogeian plain, lies a unique garden – Sparoza. Established in the 1960s by the renowned British urban planner Jacky Tyrwhitt, around her private home, it is an organic, experimental, dry garden with a treasure trove of nearly 1,000 different Greek native and Mediterranean-climate zone plants. It has also been the headquarters of the Mediterranean Garden Society (MGS) since 1994.

It is difficult to overstate the specialness of this place. It is one of only a handful of historic gardens in Greece and has been a flagship for the promotion of dry gardening since its inception. Entering the garden today, it's hard to imagine the lunar landscape of a hill that Jacky bought. As she began to tackle her project, she found herself working on an arid, hot and windy site, with poor stony soil and plenty of protruding bedrock. She even resorted to using dynamite to blow craters into the hillside for her tree-planting holes, and wrote of Sparoza that 'anything that grew under the difficult conditions prevailing here would be almost certain to grow better elsewhere'.

However, the story of the garden is that of not one but two pioneering plantswomen. On her death in 1983, Jacky left Sparoza to the Goulandris Natural History Museum for the protection and

preservation of the native flora. A transitional period followed until Sally Razelou, the Anglo-Irish artist-gardener, took over the reins in 1992, and a new phase of garden reinvigoration began. She not only nurtured and developed Sparoza for nearly 30 years until her death in 2021, but also helped found the MGS in the early 1990s.

Both women championed the use of native flora at a time when it was largely overlooked, and both celebrated the rhythm of a natural Mediterranean garden, with flowering beginning in autumn, prompted by rain, peaking in spring, then resting in summer. Significantly, both kept records of climate data and their work.

I came to Sparoza in 2000 as the first of Sally's garden assistants, and this experience and her friendship had a profound influence on me and my work. I remember driving (rather fast) up the track to the property with Sally at the wheel, catching a first glimpse of olives and mounds of *Pistacia lentiscus* in the otherwise aestivating, unirrigated phrygana (scrubland). We curved round the bottom end of this long, narrow piece of hillside, revealing a modest, vernacular stone house lying long and low in a hollow, with the intensive, watered part of the garden wrapped around it.

I have now come back to see Lucie Willan, the current custodian, and together we walk ▾

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Above Jacky's old swimming pool has been repurposed as a wildlife pond; especially important where there is little freshwater habitat. Behind the pool are some of the cypresses Jacky used for original windbreak planting (planned with the help of Greek landscape architect Marina Adams).

Right above Amid the varied, multi-layered planting in Derek's Garden (named for Derek Toms, one of the instigators of the MGS), the Australian *Eucalyptus globulus* towers above the clipped forms of *Pistacia lentiscus* and *Teucrium fruticans*, perfect foils for the natural growth of *Phlomis fruticosa*, *Pseudodictamnus acetabulosus*, *Cneorum tricoccon* and *Acanthus mollis*.

Right below A window into the rich, floral mosaic of the woodland border. To the right, a beautifully pruned *Phillyrea latifolia* lends height and structure to treasures such as *Euphorbia characias*, *Iris germanica*, *Salvia microphylla* and *Agapanthus praecox* subsp. *orientalis*.



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8 key plants from Sparoza

1 *Bulbine frutescens* 'Hallmark' A tough performer from South Africa, happy in sun and shade, tolerating alkalinity well. Abundant orange flowers rarely pause at Sparoza. Height and spread: 50-60cm x 60cm. RHS H3†.

2 *Cistus x skanbergii* Masses of pretty, soft salmon-pink flowers cover this evergreen cushion in spring. Associates very well with silver-greys and lime-greens. 60-80cm x 1m. RHS H4.

3 *Euphorbia acanthothamnos* A classic dry-garden plant that deserves to be better known. Forms a leafless, spiky, architectural bronzed cushion in summer; brilliant lime-green flowers in early spring. 30-50cm x 70cm-1m. RHS H2.

4 *Ferraria crispa* The exotic, velvety, South African starfish iris is a stand-out example of the wealth of ephemeral Mediterranean bulbs at Sparoza. Full sun or semi shade. 30-50cm x 20cm. RHS H2.

5 *Melianthus major* This South African endemic with striking architectural leaves injects drama and a sub-tropical edge into planting compositions. Enjoys the protection of a wall. 1.5-2.5m x 1.5-2.5m. AGM*. RHS H3.

6 *Petromarula pinnata* Beautiful Cretan chasmophytic endemic. Countless blue star-shaped flowers on tall stems in late spring. Happiest in deep gorges, sun or shade. 50-80cm x 50-60cm. RHS H4.

7 *Rosa banksiae* var. *banksiae* Every April, this iconic Banksian rose produces a profusion of double, creamy-white, fragrant flowers easily covering a seasoned wooden pergola to the east of the house. 4-8m x 2.5-5m. RHS H5, USDA 8a-10b.

8 *Styrax officinalis* This fascinating eastern Mediterranean shrub or small tree grows on dry rocky slopes, producing scented, white, star-like flowers in spring. The fragrant resin (storax) has been used medicinally and as a perfume since ancient times. 6m x 3-4m. RHS H5, USDA 9a-10b.

*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society.
†Hardiness ratings given where available.



There are far-reaching views over the fertile Mesogeian plain from the wild part of the garden. The thin, stony soil found on Sparoza hill is home to a rich diversity of wild annuals and bulbs. Leaves of *Narcissus papyraceus* and *Charybdis maritima* are seen here, as well as shrubby *Phlomis fruticosa* and *Thymbra capitata*. Many of the silvery olives on the hill offer shade alongside planted pines and cypresses.



Sparozza is a tribute to what you can create on a very hostile site with limited resources, but lots of time, vision and love

▷ out of the huge glass doors on the east side of the house to the spacious verandah, graced with a huge Banksian rose. We look down on the series of terraces that are Jacky's original garden: an extraordinary array of trees, shrubs and bulbs from the five Mediterranean climate zones of the world.

"I think of the Terraces as a Mediterranean cottage garden," says Lucie. "We're constantly adding to increase diversity and interest." There's a strong showing of South African plants, with *Freylinia lanceolata*, *Coleonema album*, *Euryops virgineus*, *Searsia lancea* and *Haemanthus coccineus* growing amid natives such as *Cercis siliquastrum* and *Fritillaria obliqua*, one of the rarest in Greece.

The Dancing Olives, the affectionate name given by Sally to a group of artistically pruned wild olives at the far end of the terraces, mark the point where garden merges with wild phrygana. And this is where the real drama and remarkable, ephemeral beauty of this garden comes into its own. "Sparozza remains, in essence, a wild garden," explains Lucie.

"Native bulbs and annuals come in successive waves, peaking one after the other. It starts with pink carpets of *Cyclamen graecum* in autumn, moving through crocuses and *Sternbergia lutea* to *Anemone coronaria* and *A. pavonina* in mid-winter. It is astonishingly beautiful and incredibly moving." The drama builds with annuals and bee orchids erupting in April. "And then, after a final crescendo

of *Bupleurum flavum* shot through with the electric blue of *Delphinium peregrinum*, it goes quiet. I've started a New Year's Day flower count, and on 1 January this year, we had 136 species flowering."

We walk to the specialist nursery Sally created almost 30 years ago where we ooh and aah over treasures such as Cretan endemic *Petromarula pimata*, while musing over the climate challenges we have both experienced. During my time here, Sally recorded Sparozza's lowest ever rainfall year (190mm). Lucie's records show marked erraticism, with summer temperatures edging higher and heavy snowfall three years in a row, when usually it would only be expected every ten.

After the exceptional drought of 2000, Sally trialled succulents such as aloes and yuccas, and found they were also excellent at reversing erosion. This spirit of experimentation continues — Lucie is planning a new trial area to help gardeners select what will withstand these increasing extremes.

"Sparozza is a tribute to what you can create on a very hostile site with limited resources, but lots of time, vision and love," she says. It seems this sanctuary of serenity is in safe hands. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Sparozza is a private garden but opens for events and pre-booked tours. **Web** sparozzagarden.com; mediterraneangardensociety.org

Above On the Terraces, Jacky's *Rosa banksiae* var. *banksiae* is in full bloom over the old wooden pergola.

On the wall to the right, below *Rosa* 'Mermaid', a dense tapestry of plants includes *Matthiola sinuata*, *Salvia canariensis* and *Cistus x skanbergii*.

Right above Looking north towards the amphitheatrical hillside, a fine specimen of *Cupressus arizonica* grows near the pools, with a young *Melia azedarach*, another remarkably drought-tolerant tree, on the right. In the foreground, the lime-green flowers of the *Euphorbia acanthothamnus* are interwoven with dark-green *Salvia rosmarinus* and the sword-like leaves of *Chasmanthe floribunda*.

Right below Sally experimented with various aloes in the 1990s and early 2000s, when Sparozza experienced particularly low rainfall. Often planted from stem cuttings, almost all have taken, surviving with no water support and helping to repair soil erosion. *Aloe x caesia* is particularly robust, flowering winter to spring.

