

The Legacy of True Passion for Horticulture

GARDENS OF SÃO MIGUEL, THE AZORES

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The greatest historical legacy of the gardens found today on the small North Atlantic island of São Miguel (37.7 N, 25.5 W) is the clear result of the nineteenth century competition among a few gentleman farmers on the island. Men like José do Canto (1820–98), José Jácome Correia (1816–86), Duarte Borges da Câmara Medeiros (1799–1872) and his brother António Borges (1812–79) devoted their lives to the ideals of agricultural and industrial progress, botanical collecting and the design of gardens and parks. They led a true revolution of vascular plants in the Azores during the eighteenth century, when more than four thousand new *taxa* (including species, subspecies and cultivars) were introduced into their gardens, in contrast with the dearth of native flora, which did not exceed seventy-two endemic species and one hundred and twenty-eight native species (Silva et al, 2010). We know exactly how and where these plants came from. They were brought in sealed boxes containing seeds or packaged inside so-called ‘coffins’, ordered from the main nursery houses of London, Paris, Ghent, Brussels or Liège – Robert Osborn, Hugh Low, James Veitch, R. Silberrad, Vilmorin Andrieux, Louis Van Houtte, Jacob Makoy, Jean Jules Linden. Others arrived from Rio de Janeiro, Algeria, Sydney or Capetown (Albergaria, 2000).

To assist them in the task of acclimatising and assigning the plants to the new gardens, these Azorean men hired garden designers from London, Paris and Liège. George Brown, Peter Wallace, Alexander Reith, François-Joseph Gabriel and others were willing to cross the Atlantic to gain experience and seek advancement in a career that became

more demanding and competitive by the day. There, they encountered difficulties, but also an immense vegetative potential that rendered the gardens – enormous greenhouses open to the sky – a true paradise for ornamental horticulture.

Over the years the historic gardens of São Miguel began losing their phytodiversity while some species spread unconstrained, causing environmental problems. Of the approximately eleven hundred naturalised species and subspecies in the Azores, about 76 per cent are exotic and potentially invasive (Silva & Smith, 2000; Silva et al, 2010). This is also a legacy of an uncontrolled passion!

Of all the historical gardens in São Miguel, Terra Nostra Park (surrounding one of the islands superior hotels) emerges as the greatest example of a heritage that has been able to renew and re-invent itself. The magnetic atmosphere of the garden is due to the prodigious exuberance of its plants, the berms and slopes covered with mosses and lichens, the running water in rusty tones and the huge thermal water tank that invites visitors to enjoy a relaxing and invigorating bath.

The park dates back to the late eighteenth century when an American citizen, Bostonian Thomas Hickling (1745–1834), acquired land in Furnas and built a cottage (then known as Yankee Hall), a pond and a small recreational woodland. Later, as fate would have it, Hickling's prosperous business sank into bankruptcy and the garden was acquired by the Praia family. Duarte Borges da Câmara Medeiros, 1st Viscount of Praia, took on the expansion and redesign of the park, which was continued by his son, the 2nd Viscount and 1st Marquis of Praia. It was then that the grottoes, the great serpentine, the lakes, belvederes and fountains were built; at the end of the long Alameda das Palmeiras, he ordered a monument to be erected to his parents in a wide area surrounded by fantastic palm trees from the Canary Islands (*Phoenix*

canariensis). Unable to continue to maintain the garden, the descendants of the marquis sold the property to businessman Vasco Bensaúde (1896–1966), and it remains to this day in the possession of his family. Vasco Bensaúde, a botanist and park enthusiast, employed Scottish gardener John McEnroy, who trained in the Kew Gardens. To him we owe the astounding three hundred-yards-long Alameda das Ginkgos, and its forty-seven majestic trees.

A new renovation effort was carried out between 1991 and 1992, led by arboriculturist Richard Green, horticulturist David Sayers and chief gardener Fernando Costa. As a result, the park gained about three thousand new trees and shrubs, as well as new collections of plants unique in Europe, including vireya rhododendron from Malasia.

Fernando Costa and more recently his daughter, engineer Carina Costa, have enjoyed wide freedom and remarkable ingenuity in the installation of new botanical collections and thematic gardens, particularly the creation of capricious forms and the use of the valley's aquifer resources.

Terra Nostra's water tanks, built in 2012, house the particularly noteworthy giant water lily (*Vitoria cruziana*). Since the ochre-coloured thermal waters are too mineralised, the solution found to maintain the required temperature of 21–24 °C consisted of heating the walls of the tanks with the same thermal water that supplies the yellow tank (Carvalho, 2017: 113). The result is in full view: the plants complete their life-cycle and produce viable seeds year after year.

A garden tour of São Miguel has been arranged for HORTUS readers, 24–29 June 2019 and includes several nights at Terra Nostra with an exclusive guided tour of its plants and gardens. Full details from our long-standing travel associates Boxwood Tours (mail@boxwoodtours.co.uk). See also the editor's introduction to this issue.

Bibliography

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