

Maintaining and Developing Abbotsbury Sub-tropical Garden®

Stephen Griffith

Abbotsbury Subtropical Garden, Abbotsbury, Weymouth, Dorset DT3 4LA

INTRODUCTION

This eighteenth century jewel of a garden once boasted a collection of more than 4000 plant species. The neglected and semi-wild woodland and historic walled garden date back to 1765 when Elizabeth Fox-Strangways had a castle built overlooking Chesil Beach. The walled garden was originally built to protect culinary crops from the salt-laden winds blowing from the coast just a quarter of a mile away. During the following century the shelter-belt trees and woodland were planted while the plant collection was developed by Stephen Fox-Strangways, a diplomat and amateur botanist who brought many plants back to Abbotsbury from his travels. John Lindley coined the generic name *Stranvsasia* in his honour.

The present owner of Abbotsbury, The Hon. Mrs Townshend DL, is a direct descendant from Elizabeth Fox-Strangways, the family having maintained the estate since 1541. Unfortunately two world wars took away the labour force from the land and that is when the gardens became overgrown and neglected. Some progress had been made with restoration during the 1970s but it ran out of steam. In 1990, massive storm damage occurred, with hundreds of trees being blown down. This created the sudden need to put a stop to the decline of the gardens.

PRESENT DEVELOPMENT

The author was appointed to prepare a restoration and development plan for the owners and trustees, and to agree with them a time-scale and a basic infrastructure for investment. There was little information about the garden held in historical archives at Abbotsbury but fortunately an article had been published in the magazine *Country Life* more than 100 years ago, which gave useful information about how the gardens had looked in their heyday. The quality of detail in these early photographs has been astonishing. The information obtained gave the insight into how the garden should be restored and developed, overlaying the 18th century garden with new ideas in sympathy with its original spirit, historical background, and location.

ABBOTSBURY'S MICROCLIMATE

The garden is not influenced by the warmth of the North Atlantic Current that is so beneficial to horticulture on the Devon and Cornwall peninsular (see papers by Pollock and by Tompsett, this volume). However the sea still exerts an influence, warming the land by one or two degrees during the winter. This part of the Dorset coast is also in a rain-shadow which means the garden receives more hours of sunshine and hence a longer growing season during which young shoots can ripen and harden up for winter. Another contributor to Abbotsbury's peculiar microclimate is the abundance of holm oak, *Quercus ilex*, in the plantings — the evergreen foliage traps warm air beneath, limiting radiation frost.

SHELTERBELTS AND TREE PLANTING

Many estates in the UK are paying the price of neglect that started with World War II, 60 years ago, which led to a lack of labour to undertake tree planting. At Abbotsbury the garden relies on trees more than 100 years old to provide the shelter essential for any coastal garden but a proportion of these were lost during the major storms of 1987 and 1990. The Countryside Stewardship Scheme and grants for Set-Aside agricultural land have now given the opportunity to re-plant for the future. Trees used in shelterbelts are chosen for their ability to withstand strong coastal gales which often carry a lot of salt that can scorch and burn leaves. Trees used for shelter planting at Abbotsbury are: *Quercus ilex*, *Pinus muricata*, *P. radiata*, *P. nigra*, *Castanea sativa*, *Sorbus aria*, *Cupressus macrocarpa*, and *Acer pseudoplatanus*. Shelter hedging consists of: *Atriplex halimus*, *Elaeagnus xebbingei*, *Hippophae rhamnoides*, and species of *Tamarix*, *Viburnum*, *Olearia*, and *Pittosporum*.

GARDEN RESTORATION

Clearing Overgrown Borders. Plants in many parts of the garden have been fighting for the light — trees have become tall and leggy, shrubs have become overgrown and thick-trunked. Many woody species, however, were given severe regenerative pruning and resprouted with fresh new growth even from very old wood. The success rate was probably enhanced because the microclimate prevented deep penetrating frosts from damaging tissue around fresh pruning wounds. Species that have not only recovered but are flowering even better at a lower height include giant specimens of *Rhododendron arboreum*, *Camellia japonica* (but *C. reticulata* is very slow to recover), *Luma apiculata* (syn. *Myrtus luma*), *Pittosporum crassifolium*, *P. tenuifolium*, *Q. ilex*, *Laurus nobilis*, *Photinia*, *Drimys winteri*, and *Magnolia campbellii*.

In opening up old borders and letting the light back onto freshly disturbed soil it is amazing to see the variety of new seedlings that emerge. These are often the offspring of plants that have long gone from that area whose seeds have lain dormant in the soil. These self-sown seedlings are a constant source of new planting material — it is vital that garden staff are knowledgeable on plant identification at the seedling stage. Ornamentals which freely self-seed and germinate at Abbotsbury include: *Q. ilex*, *Cornus capitata*, *Luma apiculata* (syn. *Myrtus luma*), *Hoheria sexstylosa*, *Euphorbia mellifera*, *Picconia excelsa*, *Trachycarpus fortunei*, *Hebe*, *Furcraea longaeava*, *Libertia*, *Crocasmia*, *Watsonia*, *Stipa*, *Nicandra*, *Solanum laciniatum*, and *Echium pininiana*.

Tree Surgery. At Abbotsbury the devastating storm of 1987 turned out to be a blessing in disguise because the old saying about not being able to see the wood for the trees was literally true. Since then there has been a slow but steady approach to felling unwanted trees, and crown lifting or reduction on some of the older specimens. Letting in the light to the understory shrubs has resulted in improved flowering, and better survival rates for the groundcover species. Honey fungus, *Armillaria* sp., is present in the garden but usually only damages already weak or poor specimens and it has been possible, though sometimes frustrating, to learn to live with it. The by-product from wood chipping and stump grinding has been a beneficial mulch while good quality tree trunks have been used to produce furniture for the garden.

Restoring Vistas. Much detective work was necessary to determine how the vistas should have looked due to the overgrowth of trees and filling-in of view-points. One clue is from looking at potential views in winter when there are no leaves on the trees, leading to a better idea of where to remove branches or whole trees to restore original vistas.

Working with Site Topography. When developing the planting plan much thought was put into placing plants in areas that replicate as closely as possible their natural habitat. By creating geographical zones within the garden we have allowed for this and at the same time added to the educational value of the garden for members of the visiting public. Geographical representations include a Sino-Himalayan glade, South American border, southern hemisphere garden, and Mediterranean bank, which also includes many South African fynbos plants which thrive in the acid soil.

INSURANCE POLICY PROPAGATION

Abbotsbury's microclimate means there is rarely frost, except in deep pockets of land where cold air is known to collect. But occasionally there are unexpected frosts which can kill some of our fine, unusual, tender specimens. We therefore have a policy of propagation to ensure a supply of young plants to replace any that are so affected.

Seed Propagation. Plants such as *Echium pininana* and *E. wildpretii* have been known to drop their leaves but still recover after frosts of -3°C , the lowest temperature in the gardens since 1996. These plants also produce masses of seed on their giant flower spikes every year so we harvest enough for bulking up these important plants. They are often biennial and will die after flowering, with the odd exception. By growing lots of them, in various locations, some in full sun and others in woodland shade, we can guarantee a high survival rate. *Geranium maderense*, *G. canariense*, and *G. palmatum* are treated in the same way. *Canna indica* comes true from seed every year, and although many survive outside there is sure to be a problem winter at some point.

Vegetative Propagation. The list of plants propagated from cuttings is added to every year and currently includes *Osteospermum*, *Salvia*, *Penstemon*, *Echium candicans*, and *Impatiens tinctoria*. Plants propagated from suckers include *Tetrapanax papyrifer*, *Musa basjoo*, bamboos, and *Clerodendron*.