

# Quinta Jardins do Lago, Madeira

Helen Harrison discovers a botanical trove growing in the grounds of a hotel on the 'Garden Island' of Madeira

PHOTOGRAPHY: HELEN HARRISON

Quinta Jardins do Lago at dawn with *Spathodea campanulata*, *Dracaena draco* and various palms.

**F**OR CENTURIES THE gardens of Quinta Jardins do Lago, Funchal, were maintained by successive owners for the exclusive enjoyment of their families and friends. However, in 2000, this elegant Manor House became a Botanical Hotel and today its sub-tropical gardens provide pleasure and interest for guests all year round. No matter where you call 'home' – a Pacific island or the Himalaya, any continent except Antarctica – you will find a familiar plant here. 'The range of plants grown in Madeira is extraordinarily diverse', observes General Manager Sr Alberto Reynolds.

The House and gardens (3.5 acres), date from the 18th century. Although level ground is unusual in Funchal, this Quinta lies on a plateau (Portuguese: Achada. Its original name was Quinta da Achada). South-facing, and overlooking the city, the gardens were developed in the 19th century. 'All the wealthy vineyard owners competed with each other then to create magnificent gardens', continues Sr Reynolds. 'Most of the owners have had long-standing connections with Great Britain, or the United States, and been involved with Madeira's wine trade. Some had particular horticultural >>



## Plant pilgrimage

interests too. Two books about Madeira's plants were published in London in 1845 by members of the Penfold family, owners between 1811 and 1881'.

England's oldest alliance is with Portugal, ratified before either country wielded global influence, and before the Portuguese settlement of Madeira in 1420. It was sealed by the marriage of King John of Portugal with Philippa, granddaughter of Edward III in 1387. Their son, Henry the Navigator, provided the initial inspiration for Portuguese seafarers during the subsequent two centuries. Portuguese explorers' success in finding new sources of trade and wealth resulted in increasing prosperity for the previously uninhabited island of Madeira. It rapidly became a principal provisioning stop and port of call for ships from many countries, whether travelling to the Americas or round Africa to Asia.

The map of the world had changed. Once Dias had rounded the Cape of Good Hope for the first time (1488), Portugal established regular, maritime trade-routes between Lisbon and Goa (1497).

In 1500, the Portuguese landed in South America and by 1520 their control of trade encompassed the coast of eastern Africa, the entrance to the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean (including south-east Madagascar), the west coast of India, the Malaccas (Malaysia) and the Spice Islands (Indonesia).

The world's largest supplier of sugar in 1500, Madeira was initially disadvantaged when Portugal expanded its sugarcane production in Brazil, producing cheaper and better-refined sugar. Within 50 years the island's production had been supplanted. So Madeira turned to wine. The realization that cask wine serendipitously improved after months at sea (first warmed, then cooled while being used as ballast), was the start of its important wine industry.

The British community in Madeira had developed since the 15th century. By the second half of the 18th century, representatives of wine exporters predominated among British merchants (the permanent British population was c.100 in 1807 when the island was 'amicably' annexed by Britain). Numerically small, they were disproportionately influential. In the 19th century, numbers rose to c. 500, including an increasing but transient population of visitors and invalids attracted by the benign climate. Caused principally by the Gulf Stream and the Canary Current, this climate also enabled native plants to flourish, as did new introductions arriving on ships from all over the world. Botanists and plant hunters had long been aware of Madeira. Hans Sloane is considered a pioneer of botanical exploration in Macaronesia with his short visit in 1687 (de Sequeira *et al.* 2010).



### PEARL OF THE ATLANTIC

📍 **Archipelago** Madeira is one of four islands lying 300 miles west of the Moroccan coast and measures 35 × 14 miles.

**Geography** The island is the upper part of an inactive volcano rising nearly four miles from the Atlantic floor. Pico Ruivo is Madeira's highest peak at 1,862m.

**Climate** Below 1,500 metres, the mean temperature everywhere is between 10 and 20°C and precipitation is between 500 and 1,000mm.

**Garden** Jardins do Lago is sheltered, south-facing and 146m above sea-level, on a soil of volcanic origin with a pH varying between neutral and slightly acid. Plants grow luxuriantly.

**Website address** [jardinsdolago.com](http://jardinsdolago.com)

### The Garden

The arboretum (west of the House), contains some of the oldest trees. Alongside the main path, the huge trunk of a *Cinnamomum camphora* causes many to stop and stare. Native to South East Asia, it was probably planted in the late-18th century. Nearby is a large pohutukawa, *Metrosideros excelsa*. It is only from afar that the height of an *Araucaria bidwillii* is appreciated. It towers above trees which elsewhere would be considered substantial: *Agathis robusta*, *Brosimum alicastrum* and *Pinus canariensis*.

There are many flowering trees and shrubs here. *Camellia japonica* bounds the main path. Smaller paths enable everything to be seen at close quarters. The lilac-blue flowers of *Wigandia urens* cascade along a boundary wall. Patches of sunlight illuminate colourful plants beneath the tree canopy: the orange-red flowers of the bizarre labiate *Holmskioldia sanguinea*, the plastic spathes of *Anthurium andreanum* and the coppery pink leaves of *Acalypha wilkesiana*, more usually seen in northern Europe as a houseplant. Specimens here reach over two metres tall.



The view across the lawns from the House (above); flowering vines decorate the front of the south-facing Manor House (right).





Climbers feature prominently in the garden. *Thunbergia mysorensis* (left) decorating one of several arbours; the flowers of *Strongylodon macrobotrys* (centre) are among the most beautiful in all of nature; Bengal trumpetvine, *Thunbergia grandiflora* (right), can become a troublesome weed in warm climates.

---

## Some floral highlights of Quinta Jardins do Lago

Clockwise from top left:

Flaming glorybower,  
*Clerodendrum splendens*,  
from western Africa.

*Phragmipedium schlimii*  
from Colombia is one of  
many orchidaceous plants  
that thrive in the garden.

*Medinilla magnifica* has had  
the distinction of appearing  
on the Belgian 10,000 franc  
note and is grown in hanging  
baskets in the garden.

The Brazilian native  
*Pyrostegia venusta* is a  
member of the family  
*Bignoniaceae* that enjoys  
the mild Madeiran climate.



Groundcover and underplanting are well planned throughout the garden. On the north-side of the arboretum, a mature specimen of *Pandanus utilis* sprawls horizontally but the spread of naturalized *Diets iridioides* softens the appearance of its sparse, contorted branches. Bromeliads and mass plantings of *Sansevieria trifasciata* and *Cymbidium* provide further interest.

There are more than 30 fern species in the arboretum (including *Goniophlebium subauriculatum*, *G. formosanum*, *Microsorium musifolium* and *Platynerium bifurcatum*). Another collection of trailing-plants is grouped against the trunk of a *Washingtonia filifera* (near the arboretum entrance), including *Ceropegia linearis* subsp. *woodii*, *Crassula marnieriana*, *Sedum morganianum* and the string of pearls plant, *Curio rowleyanus*.

### Botanical meandering

Walking out of the arboretum, with the front of the House on the left, the whole expanse of the south- and east-facing garden is seen. Within the garden there are several views revealing the House but, generally, buildings do not impinge. Overall, the impression is of meandering walks among the exotica, accompanied by scents, birdsong and, occasionally, small, silent, scurrying Madeiran wall-lizards. Gently sloping paths and steps connect any slight differences in elevation.

‘We have nearly 40 species of tropical and subtropical climbers here’, explains Sr Reynolds. ‘The vines on the front of the House were selected many years ago to ensure something was always in bloom throughout the year.’ By January there is a mass of red, orange, lilac and blue flowers against the white walls and painted shutters: *Campsis radicans*, *Clerodendrum splendens*, *Petrea volubilis*, *Pyrostegia venusta*, *Thunbergia grandiflora*, *Cochlianthus caracalla* and *Wisteria sinensis*.

Nearby, collections of succulents and orchids are grouped in two borders. In addition to *Phalaenopsis* and *Vanda* orchids, there are terrestrial, epiphytic and lithophytic plants including *Epidendrum ibaguense*, fragrant *Coelogyne cristata* (bearing the largest flowers of its genus), *Paphiopedilum*, *Brassia maculata*, *Stanhopea oculata* and *Phragmipedium schlimii*. Succulents grow throughout the garden. This border of small plants includes *Echinocactus grusonii*, *Bryophyllum fedtschenkoi* and *Curio repens*. Walking past the flowering climbers, near the corner of the House there is a collection of epiphytic *Tillandsia*, some already bearing small, delicate flowers. Pink- and blue-flowered *T. cyanea* grows elsewhere in the garden.

Turning away from the *Tillandsia* and past more *Bromeliaceae* (including *Lutheria splendens* and *Alcantarea imperialis*), a path leads towards the southernmost area of the garden through a long pergola with two of the most colourful and ornamental of the garden’s vines. Each suspends lengthy racemes of flowers in contrasting colours: metallic blue-green *Strongylodon macrobotrys* and yellow and red *Thunbergia mysorensis*. *Dracaena marginata* edges part of the path. Small, yellow flowers of *Reinwardtia indica* peek above the low wall on one side.

### Palms and bananas

Red palm weevil reached Madeira in 2007, excavating holes up to a metre long in palm trunks. Its effects can be seen at Jardins do Lago where dead tree trunks have been hollowed out to make planting containers.

However, there remain many palm species in the garden. Especially striking are *Bismarckia nobilis*, *Phoenix reclinata*, *Archontophoenix cunninghamiana*, *Trachycarpus fortunei* and *Syagrus romanzoffiana*. *Malvaviscus arboreus*, *Hibiscus rosa-sinensis* and *Euphorbia pulcherrima* add colourful underplanting.

The garden’s southern boundary overlooks the Bay of Funchal which can be viewed across the productive kitchen garden. Vivid red *Erythrina atitlanensis* grows with *Mangifera indica* along the eastern boundary. *Musa* grow here too: *M. velutina*, with its pink, hairy, seeded bananas, and Madeira’s popular *M. × paradisiaca* (*M. acuminata* × *M. balbisiana*). In addition to *Ficus carica* and *Punica granatum*, less common fruit trees here include *Carica papaya*, *Eugenia bergii* and *Psidium cattleianum*. Elsewhere are *Eriobotrya japonica* and *Tamarindus indica*. Possibly the most extraordinary fruit tree is *Artocarpus heterophyllus*, jackfruit, producing the largest fruit of any tree, weighing up to 120lbs. Endemic to south-west India, where Portugal established Europe’s first trading-post in 1501, its heartwood produces the light brown dye for Buddhist monks’ robes.

A large number of *Strelitzia* grow near the *Musa*: *S. nicolai* growing to over six metres, *S. reginae* subsp. *reginae*; and the unusual yellow- and blue-flowered *S. reginae* ‘Mandela’s Gold’. Beyond them, beside a trellis covered with *Thunbergia grandiflora*, another vista is revealed flanked by red *Kohleria hirsuta*, both yellow and orange *Abutilon* × *hybridum* and scented, lilac *Tetradenia riparia*. On this eastern side of the garden, the panorama moves away from Funchal city and the surrounding mountains, northward towards the House. Mature trees include >>

several tall *Cupressus sempervirens*, a particularly large turpentine tree, *Syncarpia glomulifera*, *Quercus robur*, *Apollonias barbuiana* (one of Madeira's native trees) and a mature *Callistemon viminalis*. Recently, more young *Callistemon citrinus* and *C. citrinus* 'Reeves Pink' have been planted. Other recent plantings include the Madeiran native *Dracaena draco* subsp. *draco*, *Xanthostemon chrysanthus*, *Metrosideros collina* var. *villosa* and *Grevillea* 'Wattle Bird Yellow'. Fragrant *Hedychium gardnerianum* scents this area.

### A reptilian surprise

It is with a moment's bewilderment that, past a wall of cascading *Centradenia inaequilateralis*, one encounters Colombo, a giant Galapagos tortoise resident in the garden since 1969. He spends his days on a neatly cropped lawn framed by more Mediterranean cypresses, *Roystonea regia*, *Hibiscus mutabilis*, *Beaucarnea recurvata* and an immense *Ravenala madagascariensis*.

Looking west (towards the House), a female *Cycas circinalis* displays its 'necklace' of mature seeds. Other cycads here include *C. revoluta*, *Encephalartos transvenosus* and *E. villosus*. Scented *Trachelospermum jasminoides* and evergreen *Solandra maxima* climb along another pergola where *Medinilla magnifica*, rose grape, plunges from hanging baskets. Nearer the House, other hanging baskets contain the gesneriad *Aeschynanthus radicans* and a border of South African plants includes pale orange-flowered *Scadoxus multiflorus* subsp. *katherinae*, formerly used for arrow poisons, fishing poisons and as an ingredient in traditional medicines.

Circumnavigation is complete. In front of the House are two terraced lawns, linked by stone steps. On the upper lawn, three *Livistona chinensis* flank a decorative pool and fountain. *Codiaeum variegatum* and *Thunbergia alata* provide colour. Mature trees and shrubs surround the lawns. Substantial *Quercus suber*, *Q. × hispanica* and *Bauhinia galpinii* dominate one side, a magnificent *Spathodea campanulata* and a mature *Dracaena draco* the other. Other taxa include *Aechmea blanchetiana* and *Cascabela thevetia* (syn. *Thevetia peruviana*), its black fruit encasing the plant's large, poisonous seed.

Beyond the lower lawn, a variety of trees and plants screen the entrance and boundary of the kitchen garden: highly scented *Plumeria rubra* var. *acutifolia*, *Wollemia nobilis*, *Bambusa vulgaris* and pink manjack *Tabebuia heterophylla*. Further along this southern perimeter is the garden's nursery.

Between 2010 and 2015, plants for Funchal's Parque Ecológico were grown here. The Quinta has links with the Parque and made this space available after nearly 90% of the Parque's plantation sites were destroyed during the wildfires of 2010 and new plants were urgently needed. Native species and plants brought on for transplantation included *Adiantum reniforme* subsp. *reniforme*, its decorative leaves said to have inspired patterns in traditional, Madeiran embroidery, *Geranium maderense*, *G. palmatum*, *Euphorbia mellifera* and *Ocotea foetens*.

Inevitably, many interesting trees and shrubs have been omitted from this armchair tour including beautiful *Dombeya cacuminum*, the Malabar nut, *Justicia adhatoda*, and *Gomphocarpus fruticosus*, a favourite host of caterpillars of the Monarch butterfly.

### The future

'Jardins do Lago is unique. As early as 1843, it was described as the most important garden in Madeira', says Sr Reynolds. 'Our initial priority was to ensure plants were revealed to their best advantage but now we're developing the garden and plan to introduce species previously here but subsequently lost. More native fruit trees. And some new 'curiosities' perhaps? Unusual vines from Brazil? We already grow tea and coffee – perhaps we should try chocolate too?'

'We believe profoundly that both the study of horticulture and an appreciation of our environment are important. Hence our connection with the Parque Ecológico. We want to conserve and promote both our garden and the remarkable variety of flora found elsewhere in Madeira because we really believe they are something very special for people to discover and enjoy.'

Having stayed only a week, I left knowing there were still more plants and vistas waiting to be found. Jardins do Lago is a Botanical Hotel providing feasts for all the senses. ○

---

**Helen Harrison** has photographed and written about unusual gardens throughout Europe, and from the Arctic to the Caribbean.

---

**Acknowledgment** Thanks to Professor Raimundo Quintal for his assistance with providing and checking information for this article.

---

**Reference de Sequeira, MM et al.** (2010) The Madeiran plants collected by Sir Hans Sloane in 1687, and his descriptions. *Taxon* 59: 598–612.



*Codiaeum variegatum* and *Agave attenuata* (top left) basking in the morning sun; in the arboretum grows *Wigandia urens* flanked by the tall straight trunk of *Agathis robusta* (above); the flowers of *Strelitzia nicolai* (left).



Colombo, the giant Galapagos tortoise has been a garden resident since 1969.