

# MONSERRATE

## Brief History

The garden of Monserrate in Sintra, Portugal is considered one of the most important English landscape gardens beyond the shores of the British Isles. It was founded in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Gerard De Visme, a wealthy and cultured merchant, who had made his fortune from trade with Brazil. The house was briefly occupied by William Beckford and quickly fell into ruin, an event cruelly recorded by the poet Lord Byron :

*“Here didst thou dwell, here schemes of pleasure plan,  
Beneath yon mountain's ever-beauteous brow ;  
But now, as if a thing unblest by man,  
Thy fairy dwelling is as lone as thou!  
Here giant weeds a passage scarce allow  
To halls deserted, portals gaping wide,  
Fresh lessons to the thinking bosom, how  
Vain are the pleasaunces on earth supplied;  
Swept into wrecks anon by Time's ungentle tide.”*

Lord Byron came to Sintra in July 1809. He placed Monserrate firmly on the tourist map. His moralizing rhymes described the wrecked house and garden as a direct consequence of the wanton lifestyle of its former resident. Henceforth all English visitors to Lisbon would make the pilgrimage to Sintra to see the famous beauty spot. Countless travelogues, written by well-to-do trippers and military men stationed in Portugal after the Napoleonic wars, describe the slow demise of the once luxurious property.

In 1841, one such tourist became so enchanted with the property that he resolved to buy it, no easy task in a country still bound by aristocratic laws of entailment. Francis Cook, returning from a Grand Tour of Southern Europe and the Middle East, had landed in Lisbon, fallen in love with the daughter of a wealthy merchant, and according to family tradition, discovered Monserrate whilst honeymooning in Sintra. Cook was the son of William Cook, wholesale draper, and heir to a fortune of over two million pounds.

From the outset, he clearly understood the enormous potential of Monserrate as a landscape garden. Although unable to purchase the estate until 1856, he began planning the grounds as early as 1852, presumably under some sort of leasing arrangement. The oldest exotic tree in the garden was planted at this time: *Araucaria heterophylla*. Building works to restore the house were directed by James T. Knowles, FRIBA, and completed in 1860. The gardens were laid out at the same time according to Cook's own instruction. It is said that over 2000 men were employed on the enterprise.

Both house and garden are minutely described in a 300 page epic of rhyming couplets entitled *Fairy Life in Fairyland*, written by Dr. Thomas Cargill. An amateur botanist, Cargill had quite an influence on the early development of the garden. He was widely travelled, and the poem displays his knowledge of Australian and South African flora.

The Cook family remained at Monserrate for four generations, however the estate was finally sold in the 1940's, first to a speculator and then passed to the Portuguese State. The once magnificent gardens slowly declined until following the 1974 revolution they became once more, virtually abandoned.

The Friends of Monserrate were founded in 1992 as an independent volunteer organisation devoted to the promotion and restoration of the estate. In 1995 Monserrate was inscribed, along with the cultural landscape of Sintra, as part of the UNESCO list of World Heritage. In 2000 the Portuguese government established the *Parques de Sintra*, a public company devoted to the restoration and management of cultural heritage in Sintra, which since that time has run Monserrate gardens and undertaken a series of restoration projects for the house and garden.

### **The Rose Garden: history and recent works**

*“Rounding this blaze of glory resurrect,  
Tread we our lower Lawn, soft carpet green,  
“With Juniper and Cypress all bedecked,  
And Rose, and Rhododendron rich between,  
“And fair Camellia ; - now a landscape scene  
“Romantic, openeth to our gaze : the Lawns  
“Do seem to join continuous, and there dawns  
“Sudden the Fairy Palace on our sight”*

Recent works at Monserrate have restored much of the spatial quality of the gardens that surround the palace. In modern memory the house has perched precariously at the top of a steep corridor of lawn: seemingly somewhat overbalanced and awkward. The lawns that now *join continuous* from below the music-room-tower to the Great Lawn, sweep down through the newly cleared rose garden to provide an ample setting for the building. Once again the Palace is allowed to sit comfortably on the hilltop.

The history of the rose garden is not as well known as other parts of Monserrate, but it is clear that the garden existed from the earliest interventions of Francis Cook. There are sporadic references to the Rose Garden in garden descriptions right up to 1929, the final flowering of Monserrate, long before the slow decline that has brought it to our days.

The rose is a flower full of symbolic value, flower of love, flower of the English nation, but for Cook the rose was the *Queen of Flowers*, and represented all that the gardens of the Orient could bring to his exotic creation:

*“And flowery land of ‘Old Cathay’  
“Reach we oft by break of day,  
“And anon its sweets inhale,  
“Borne on the musk-opressèd gale,  
“And catch the spicy airs that fan  
“The languid shores of fair Japan,  
“Then in a sea-shell’s depth we lie,*

*“Skimming the azure floods, and hie  
“To Indus’ banks, or Ganges shores,  
“Where brindled tiger sullen roars :  
“Nor pause we long ; and lo! appear  
“Our own loved gardens of Cashmere,  
“Where I my fresh musk-roses twine,  
“Fresh fragrant and divine!”*

Clearly this was no ordinary rose garden. Heavy with fragrance and redolent of the Far East, the roses of Cook’s garden were as charged with mystery as the alabaster screens of his palace or the tiger-skin rugs spread in its halls. The roses and little box hedges of the *Petit Trianon* and Marie Antoinette had no place in this garden, Cook sought to recreate an atmosphere he had known as a young man through powerful floral association:

*“Mine are the gorgeous climes as erst,  
“Where my frolic youth was nurst,  
“Eastern climes where bending glows,  
“The crimson of the blushing rose.”*

By the second half of the nineteenth century the plant explorers and rose breeders had together radically altered the range of roses available to wealthy landowners in search of novelty. Many of these roses had been produced by hybridising species obtained in China and India and were cultivated with enormous care in the great glasshouses of the era. Monserrate offered a unique opportunity to cultivate these new wonders in the open air. A new type of rose garden was needed. The site was chosen carefully: the soil, a perfect loamy clay, lying within a warm sheltered valley between ancient Cork Trees and newly planted pines.

*“But, Fairies all! behold  
Again that field of flowers,  
“Pink, damask, white and gold ;”*

*A field of flowers*: traces of flowerbeds cut into the lawn can be discerned even today. Clearing work carried out before works began was conducted in such a manner so as not to destroy any of this evidence. A detailed topographic survey was conducted. It appears that these beds were cut into the grass and were connected to a network of earthenware pipes that supplied water to the Great Lawn above. Long sweeping walks divided the sloping beds. Aside from constructions related to the water system, no other built structures have come to light.

The works to date have brought a considerable area of long-abandoned rose garden back under firm control. The clearance of 3 – 4 metre high brambles that had replaced the roses is somewhat ironic since the genus *Rubus* to which they belong is closely related to the rose. Francis Burt, Monserrate’s first Master Gardener described how nightingales lived in the dense shrubberies of the garden. Any temporary loss of habitat from this clearance will soon be recovered once the great rose-beds are re-established. Surviving roses amongst the brambles have been carefully marked and preserved. One has been identified as ‘Cloth of Gold’ – referred to in Monserrate literature as ‘Chromatella’.

During 2008/2009 the first 125 rose bushes were planted: Chinas, Teas and Noisettes imported from Peter Beales, UK. They have successfully passed the exceptionally long hot summer of 2009, cared for by the gardeners of Parques de Sintra. It is hoped that during the forth-coming planting season another 500 rose bushes will be planted. These are to be obtained from specialist European rose growers such as John Hook and Paola Lungaroni.

In addition to the historic rose cultivars grown in the new garden it is hoped that the garden will come to showcase the hybrids of *Rosa gigantea*, first hybridised by Henri Cayeux in 1906 at the Botanic Garden of Lisbon. The celebrated Belle de Portugal is the most famous example. The modern *gigantea* hybrids of Indian rosarian, Viru Viraragavan, will also be planted as an example of the continuation of the contribution that the genes of this gigantic species have made to rose breeding.

It is important to relate the history of the area surrounding the rose garden. More than half of the garden of Monserrate is missing. The recently replanted Mexico and the Rose Garden are intimately linked by a ridge top path with panoramic views of the surrounding landscape. Clearing these areas has restored to Monserrate a dimension and grandeur that had been all but lost.

Gerald Luckhurst  
Horticulturist, Landscape Architect

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