

## TRESCO ABBEY GARDENS

*Helen Senior*

A trip from mainland Britain to Treseco is not straightforward, but it is very well worth the effort. We flew from Exeter to the largest island of the group, St Mary's, where we stayed, and took the ferry across to Treseco.

Treseco Abbey Gardens were created in the mid-nineteenth century by Augustus Smith, who bought the ruins of the Abbey and built a house. A glance at the countryside outside the garden walls reveals how bleak and unpromising a site it must have been; nothing much grows except gorse. The islands are bathed by the Gulf Stream, and the climate is mild, but they are also subject to the salt-laden Atlantic gales.



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*Telopea speciosissima*



*Echium fastuosum*, a nectar-rich feast for insects



The distinctive, symmetrical shape of the Norfolk Island pine

Smith started by planting shelter-belts, first of European gorse and later of conifers - the Monterey cypress (*Cupressus macrocarpa*) and the Monterey pine (*Pinus radiata*) - both, as their names suggest, from California, and both relatively salt-tolerant. He then terraced the south-facing site to create a sheltered environment for tender plants from all around the world.





*Dasylyrion serratifolium*



*Protea cynaroides*

Even within the garden there are different micro-climates, with the upper, slightly drier, levels home to plants from South Africa and Australia, and the lower, more humid, to mostly New Zealand and South American species. Height and structure are given by the many trees. Among them are the red-flowered pohutukawa from New Zealand, *Metrosideros excelsa*; palms from the Canary Islands; tree ferns; nothofagus (southern beech); eucalyptus; pseudopanax; leucadendron (silver tree), and many others. The architectural shape of the Norfolk Island pine, *Araucaria heterophylla*, stands out.

When we were there the echiums were particularly striking, in subtly different shades of blue. Proteas grew everywhere; aloes and aeoniums abounded. There were great masses of *Fascicularia bicolor*, which must be wonderful in the autumn, when the leaves turn red and they produce their exquisite blue flowers.

But the garden is not just a plant collection. It is a beautifully designed garden. From the entrance, the path leads up to a formal pool with a wonderful bronze fountain in the form of an agave. Beyond that is a terrace, incorporating the Shell House, which has walls embellished with sea-shells in mosaic patterns. The Long Walk, which runs the whole width of the garden, opens up vistas in both directions. There are terraces, paths, and shady lawns.



**Agaves in the border are echoed in the form of the superb bronze water feature**

As if this wealth of wonderful plants were not enough, there is the extraordinary 'Valhalla': an exhibition of figure-heads collected by Augustus Smith from some of the many wrecks that occur on the islands. In recent years they have been restored to their original glowing colours.

All this, and red squirrels, too!

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