

A hot, dry and stony slope : evoking the 'garrigue'

Alison Piasecka

Short bio : Alison worked for many years as a management consultant in the UK, latterly gaining her garden design diploma before retirement. Moving to France nearly 20 years ago, gardening has become her main passion and coaxing a garden from tricky conditions has helped her to accept and love those plants that can handle dry and hot conditions. She lives in Oloron Sainte Marie, 30 minutes north of the Pyrenees.

TEXT

Since I first thought of writing an article for the MGS journal, France has been gripped by the 'fire-ogres', an unprecedented level of wildfire outbreaks threatening people and nature. At the same time, we have faced week-long heatwaves of 36-40c since mid-May which have further drained the soil humidity across France. It has been and continues to be a frightening time for humans and the environment. This is, I hope, the turning point when populations force governments and corporations to take action.

In some ways, it feels almost frivolous to be talking about gardening. But gardening is one of the few entry-points to the natural world that humans can access easily and locally. We know how important access to green space is for our health and wellbeing. So, for me, sharing experiences and knowledge about what can work in difficult conditions is crucial. It will help us to grow a community of knowledge about gardens that can do well, and even prosper, in heat and drought. And this will be beneficial for the planet as a whole.

A bit of history first. I first fell in love with gardening in our first house with a garden. Nearly 40 years later, I have swapped Surrey for East Scotland, Scotland for the Adour valley in South West France and now I garden in Oloron Sainte Marie, about 40 minutes south of Pau and 30 mins north of the Pyrenees.

I have moved from embracing the cottage garden through to shade gardening in Scotland, and finally to living with making gardens where water is scarce and soil is poor. As I left behind the cottage garden, the last 20 years have all been about shifting the aesthetic towards what can be done with what I have, and my principle has been to garden sustainably without chemicals or additional water than the rainfall, such as it is, provides.

So, when we moved in, one of the three garden areas around our house became my big challenge. This is the first time that I have started to make a garden where there has been nothing- it is a west-facing, stony, exposed slope of about 25m by 35m which was partially previously used as a parking area for a van. Generations ago, it

was probably terraced and a family might have grown vines there for home consumption. But the terracing has long gone, and been covered by stones, and the drystone walls collapsed at some point adding to the stony mix.

### **The stones...**

In my previous garden, situated on the plain of the Adour river valley, stones were a speciality ! Massive and heavy, with smoothed surfaces and often in a giant lozenge shape, they reminded me every day that I was gardening in a river valley.

But Oloron stones, whilst similarly massive, heavy and smoothed by the waters of time, created a new class of difficulty. They defeated trowels, spades, forks even. The pickaxe became my new best friend and even a single stone could take an hour of strategic pickaxe work before finally being able to prise the stone out of the ground.

I had muttered to myself that this slope could become a place where I could experiment with the dry, hot, stony loving plants that I had used in the river valley garden, and maybe I would try to evoke the Garrigue landscape from the Languedoc....and then along came covid and two long periods of lockdowns.

### **Time passing...**

Time was ticking by. In early February 2021, I cracked. Gone were the ideas of gravel mulches, extensive bramble removals and ground preparation. On the 'If I'm going to do it...' principle, I reasoned that all my 90 plus plants of varying sizes and maturities brought as plants or cuttings from my old garden, would be far better off slugging it out on the slope in full sun than getting damper and damper under cover in the courtyard.

And so two months of stone excavation and planting by pickaxe began. I soon learnt that it was crucial to widely and deeply excavate anywhere that I wanted to plant. The stones were malevolently clever at hiding underground, sitting pointed side up (very tricky with a pickaxe), or chumming up with other stones so that removing one meant extensive extraction of up to half a dozen.

I do admit that there are small areas, not many, where I abandoned the idea of planting. This led me to rationalise a spotty, gappy style of planting, leaving space for growth for sure, but also leaving many stones exposed and only slightly removed from their origins. For a short person, pickaxe planting and maneuvering is best done sitting down I discovered. From across the road, our neighbour's curtains twitched constantly as she tried to work out what on earth I was doing.

I have also bought plants in from nurseries, looking for those tough characters that do take time to bed in, sometimes up to two years when a taproot has to be grown.

### **The first year....**

The first year meant looking down the slope trying to spot what I had planted. The plants were all so small. Incredibly almost all of them survived the hot sun with only first-aid watering. It really did feel a bit like an act of faith. And, yes, the first summer was a worrying time.

But the first autumn rains and cooler temperatures showed me that I hadn't been entirely mad in the first place. The tiny *Lupinus arboreus* plant, a seed survivor from years before that popped up in my old garden, easily reached Im across by the following spring and flowered like a train . The *Rosa chinensis Mutabilis* at the foot of the slope which had been a small spriglet when planted swelled in size to half a metre high, and the *Koelreuteria paniculata* 'Coral Sun', transplanted from a large pot, seemed utterly unabashed by the move to the new slope. Small cuttings of *Euphorbia characias subsp. wulfenii*, hung on in there and made it through. In fact, the few plants that I lost after planting were mainly ones that I had bought, not my own cuttings.

### **The second year...**

This second year has been a real test because of the heat and the lack of rain. I will admit that there have been days since May when I felt almost afraid to go down the slope for fear of finding nothing but burnt plants.

The heat and drought this summer has brought me face to face with the brown face of summer-dry gardening. This is not an aesthetic that I grew up with, but it is one that I am learning to understand and appreciate. Brown doesn't mean dead, I know that now. Many plants re-appear in the Spring with fresh growth. As for the look of a garden space, planetary heating means we need to adjust to spring and autumn as seasons of interest, rather than cling on to Anglo-phone notions of high summer beauty.

Some plants have struggled but still remain, such as my browned- out trio of *Juniperus scopulorum* 'Blue Arrow'. I have a feeling that they will make it assuming we do get some rain eventually. I have almost lost, but hope for a renaissance later, two small plants of *Indigofera heterantha* that went in last Spring. I dug up *Elsholtzia stauntonii*, because I had grown it from seed seven years ago and couldn't bear to see it in trouble.

But some plants have astonished me, such as a late Spring planted trio of *Erodium manescavii* which have grown and flowered continuously all summer. I had expected that this *Erodium* would do well as I had grown it from seed in my old garden, but it

surpassed itself in the stony conditions of the slope. Small plants of *Centranthus lecoqii* have also done well from another late Spring planting.

The expected champions so far have been *Phillyrea angustifolia* (with 2 surprise exceptions), all of the *Phlomis* I planted, including *lanata* Pygmy, *chrysophylla*, *purpurescens*, *x termessii*, *Le Sud*, *longifolia x bailanica* and *bovei ssp. maroccana*. *Anisodonteia capensis* and 'El Rayo' have remained green and flowering all summer, and *Gaura lindheimeri*, of course, has been great, though the red form has struggled. A small *Cornus mas* looks utterly undaunted by the conditions in its second year.

All the *Euphorbias*, largely *ssp. wulfenii*, but also some *myrsinites*, have done brilliantly and, of course, the difficult conditions bring the added benefit of the plants slowly forming tighter shapes as they grow. My baby *Eryngium eburneum*s are now big clumps and I am looking forward to self-seeding. New to me, *Eriogonum fasciculatum* has clumped up nicely with small pinkish umbels of flowers that may not win a beauty contest, but are gently pleasing. Small cuttings of *Bupleurum fruticosum* have all taken well to the new surroundings.

Overall, so far, the second year has been a real surprise as I can now see shapes ebbing and flowing as the landscape emerges. A major experiment that I tried out was to underplant the 'Mutabilis' rose and the *Koelreuteria* with *Achillea crithmifolia*. In a bid to stop water loss and also to deter bindweed and bramble, I wanted to see if the allelopathic qualities of the *Achillea* would protect and preserve the tree and the rose. It has worked really well and has created an interesting low flowering ground cover. The only invader that has made it through the *Achillea* is a little bit of native violet.

### **Some practical thoughts...**

I have planted some plants too close. This can be adjusted in the late autumn. Some plants have slightly outgrown their welcome. *Anisodonteia capensis* has had a light trim already this Spring, and will need another. I realise too that, given the paucity of soil to stones, I need sometimes to bulk up around the roots with some spent compost. The lack of soil might well have contributed to some of the early losses. Plant deaths do occur, maybe 10 % of the first year planting didn't make it- but many are far more resilient than might be imagined, and make comebacks that are a lovely surprise.

I do water as I plant, as deeply as I can. And I will water again deeply if a plant is really stressed in the first months. But, other than that first-aid watering when roots are growing, I don't water at all.

Continual minor bramble removal happens throughout the year on cooler days. I had feared the worst, but, in the main, the planted plants have surpassed the bother factor of the small bramble growths. Early summer self sown grasses can seem to predominate in June, but rather than expose the poor soil to the sun, I leave them and

live with it, knowing that in a few weeks most will have been burnt away by the summer sun. And as the plants continue to grow, this will become less and less of a problem.

We have used the black plastic sheeting method at the flat end of the slope to clear space for planting. The first section was in place for a year, and did a good job so we have moved the sheeting onto a new section.

It has been and continues to be a brilliant process. The slope is evolving gradually into a lively, greened, flowering and architectural picture as the plants mature, and the sound of insects and occasional sightings of toads and hedgehogs is a delight. As the small trees and larger shrubs grow, the shapes will change and emerge, and my stony slope is becoming something more than an abandoned van park. This also seems to me the beginnings of a worthwhile step towards a gardening response to planetary heating.

#### **Photos of :**

Koeleruteria paniculata 'Coral Sun' with underplanting of Achillea crithmifolia

Flowerheads of Eriogonum fasciculatum

Lupinus arboreus Alba

Bupleurum fruticosum

#### **Two books that have inspired :**

'Plants and Landscapes for Summer-Dry Climates' compiled by East Bay Municipal Utility District, 2004

A real inspiration encouraging the embracing of summer-brown and summer-dry.

There is a new version of the above book called 'Gardening in Summer-Dry Climates' by Nora Harlow and Saxon Holt, Timber Press 2021

'Bringing the Mediterranean into your Garden' by Olivier Filippi, Filbert Press 2019  
The indispensable guide. A little dry in style, but really worth it.