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IN BRIEF

What Dry, naturalistic Mediterranean garden.

Where Corfu, Greece.

Size Approximately three acres.

Soil Shallow, free-draining, stony and alkaline.

Climate Mediterranean, with short rainy winters (November to April) and long, hot, dry summers, but with twice the rainfall of other parts of Greece.

Hardiness zone USDA 9a.

Bodded into a west-facing hillside, the stone-clad house and nature-inspired garden capture mesmerising views over the Ionian Sea and distant mountains. Sculpted olive trees and pomegranates (*Punica granatum*) punctuate the rich shrub and perennial planting below, featuring colourful *Centranthus ruber*, *Anthyllis cytisoides* and *Satureja thymbra*.

Natural selection

British designer Jennifer Gay has transformed a neglected, ancient olive grove into a sublime, sustainable garden in Corfu

WORDS ZIA ALLAWAY PHOTOGRAPHS CLIVE NICHOLS



Carved out of an abandoned olive grove on a rocky hillside in Corfu, there sits a dazzling garden with breathtaking views over the turquoise Ionian Sea. Taking her cues from nature, its British-born designer Jennifer Gay has sensitively bedded the garden into a natural landscape of wild maquis and ancient olive trees, using her encyclopaedic knowledge of Mediterranean flora to create a sort of heightened reality, with textures, colours and shapes poised in painterly perfection. It's a garden that celebrates the beauty of the Mediterranean coastline while providing a practical family space for her clients to enjoy.

The property belongs to Alexandra Mollof and her husband, who live in the UK but have Greek connections and were looking for a holiday home where they and their two children could enjoy Corfu's long, hot summers, immersed in nature. "Having fallen in love with the site's rugged terrain, towering trees and magnificent views of the sea and sky, the clients commissioned Paris-based architect Emmanuel Choupis of MxArchitecture to design a contemporary stone-clad house set into the hillside," explains Jennifer. "I was brought in at the beginning of the design process and worked

closely with both clients and the architect to create a natural garden that respected the beauty of the site, while complementing the contemporary architecture and integrating both into the surrounding landscape. The clients also wanted to feel close to nature and harvest their own fruit and vegetables."

Inspired by the tough, drought-resilient plants grown by French nurseryman Olivier Filippi – and by the sensitivity of Dan Pearson's gardens – Jennifer set out her masterplan for the space. "As well as anchoring the buildings into their surroundings, I wanted to retain the character of the olive groves and associated flora," she says, "while creating spaces for entertaining, swimming and playing to fulfil the family's needs."

To help blur the lines between the building and the plants behind the house, Jennifer planted three roof gardens. Two have been filled with shrubs, grasses and perennials that mirror the planting in the garden beyond, while the third, larger roof, over the living room, features lower-growing succulents that tolerate the heat and exposure of this sunnier west-facing site. "The roofs have a practical function, too," Jennifer explains, "helping to insulate and reduce the heat gain of the building." ➤

Above Jennifer has filled the slope that separates the house from the pool terrace below with drought-tolerant plants that offer summer interest, including *Cistus x pauranthus* 'Natacha', *Phlomis 'Marina'*, *Oenothera lindheimeri* and trailing Corsican rosemary.

Right above At the rear of the house, a compacted earth path, edged with Corten steel, leads out to wilder parts of the garden. In this 'forest garden' area, Jennifer has underplanted olive trees with Mediterranean herbs such as *Origanum 'Clara'*, *Salvia frutescens* and *Salvia rosmarinus* 'Sappho'.

Right below On the roof garden above the kitchen, a deep layer of aggregates supports a wide selection of plants including *Leucophyllum frutescens* and *Euphorbia segetalis* var. *pinea*, while on the living-room roof across the courtyard, a shallower substrate is home to heat-resistant pink *Drosanthemum hispidum*, alongside various sedums, *Allium tuberosum* and *iris fulgens*.



▷ house." The clients also wanted a lawn close to the house, which Jennifer designed using *Zoysia matrella*, a drought-tolerant tufted grass with lower water needs than regular turf.

Emmanuel created a series of terraces around the house for dining and relaxing, including two inner courtyards outside the kitchen and the office. He and Jennifer then collaborated on steps leading up to a sunset viewing point and lounge area above the house, framed by fruit trees, herbs and other aromatics on the upper slopes. "I've screened the pool terrace below the building with a slope packed with colourful plants, and designed a pétanque court on an adjacent terrace, surrounded by wild planting," explains Jennifer. Compacted earth paths, edged with Corten steel, branch out from the pool into an increasingly wild and untouched area that includes the original terraced olive groves.

The plants are the stars of the show, and the garden's simple structure allows space for them to shine. "The planting palette was largely inspired by the Greek landscape, with plants from other Mediterranean climate zones mixed in to extend the flowering season or add drama," says Jennifer. "Their ability to withstand drought was a major consideration, and most were shipped in from Olivier Filippi's nursery in France, where they're grown in

drought conditions to acclimatise them to the Mediterranean summers."

Throughout the garden, Jennifer has used a range of different planting styles, with the areas close to the house dedicated to high-impact plants. This is more colourful and comprises richer layers of interest and intricacy, although she has adopted a similar naturalistic theme to that used elsewhere in the garden. "Two-thirds is dedicated to grey and green foliage, with flowers coming and going throughout the year," she says, "while the remaining 30 per cent is a jewel-like mosaic of blue, pink, mauve and lime-green perennials, such as lavenders, gauras, centranthus, cistus and salvias, each with a long summer-flowering season."

Lower down the slope, groves of olive trees are growing among flower-rich meadows and deliver a small crop each year. Jennifer also made space here for a vegetable plot, and planted fruit trees, including apricots, figs, quince, nectarines, cherries, lemons and oranges on the terraces above the house. "I designed this area as a 'forest garden', where edible plants, such as herbs and vegetables, are grown in wild communities between the trees," she says.

Elsewhere, the planting mirrors the native *garrigue*, known in Greece as *phryganea*. "It's a mix of plants that loves low, ▷

Above An avenue of gnarled old olive trees, underplanted with drought-tolerant shrubs, including *Teucrium fruticans* and *Myrtus communis* 'Gull', perennials and wild *Medicago orbicularis*, an annual that seeds itself into the mix each year.

Right *Salvia rosmarinus* Prostrata Group and *Lavandula x grignoni* 'Goodwin Creek Grey' line steps leading down to an outdoor kitchen where Jennifer used drought-resilient *Zoysia matrella* in place of a traditional lawn.



An alternative lawn

Conventional lawn turf requires daily watering during Corfu's long, hot and relatively dry summers, which is why Jennifer chose *Zoysia matrella*, a hard-wearing, drought-tolerant, tufted grass that, once established, spreads to form a green carpet about 10cm in height. "To minimise tuftiness, you need walk on it regularly, or mow it with care once a year, if need be," says Jennifer. "It tolerates temperatures down to about -10°C, but will go brown at around -4°C, so try the coarser but harder *Z. japonica* for colder areas. It also needs free-draining soil and some sun to thrive. We normally water the *Zoysia* lawn every ten days during dry weather but in the UK it will rarely need irrigation once established."

To install a *Zoysia* lawn, Jennifer advises you ensure the soil is weed free before planting, then for quick coverage (within a year) plant nine plants per square metre, spacing them 30-35cm apart. "It's worthwhile keeping on top of weeding, too, while the plants are establishing," she says. "*Zoysia* also looks great planted between paving stones, softening the look of hard surfaces, while helping to increase drainage and reducing the risk of localised flooding."



▷ cushion-shaped shrubs such as *Philomus* 'Le Chat', *Cistus x skanbergii*, *Lotus dorycnium*, *Rhamnus ludovici-salvatoris*, *Helichrysum italicum* and *Origanum onites*. The property is screened from public footpaths near the boundaries with a maquis mix of native evergreen and ever-grey shrubs, as well as cypress, carob and oak that offer height and structure.

Mature olive trees that had been left unpruned for many years had developed into tall, twisted silhouettes, and now Jennifer and her gardening team are maintaining them to create dramatic sculptural elements throughout the garden. "Each tree takes four to five hours to prune, but the effect is well worth the effort," she says.

Keen to maintain the character of the landscape and minimise the garden's carbon footprint, Jennifer and Emmanuel used a creamy-golden limestone from a local quarry for the walls around the house, while stone excavated during the build was used for the walls in the wilder areas.

A primary consideration for Jennifer was maintenance, which for such a large plot and the hilly terrain had to be manageable. "I'm always striving to be as sustainable as possible," she says. "So before the garden was installed, we built

a 300-cubic-metre storage tank that collects water during the rainy season and summer downpours, which we use to irrigate the garden. Olivier Filippi's tough plants and others grown at local nurseries have kept watering to a minimum and it will reduce further as the plants establish. Another tip I picked up from Olivier is to clip the shrubs regularly when they're young, so that the developing roots have less top growth to maintain, which helps them to withstand drought."

"The garden took almost four years to install because Jennifer phased the planting to coincide with the rainy season, thereby minimising its irrigation needs – water shortages are common on Corfu in the summer – and she is justifiably proud of the results. "The freedom to create large expanses of planting, and the way the garden complements its setting of big skies and dramatic sunsets, for me makes this one of my most rewarding designs," she says. "And the care taken in choosing the right plants and installing them well means almost 95 per cent have survived, giving us another reason to celebrate." ☐

USEFUL INFORMATION

Find out more about Jennifer Gay's work at jennifergay.co.uk



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