



View to a thrill

No garden has left Alan Titchmarsh as impressed by the quality of its cultivation and overwhelmed by the sheer joy of its location as that of the Minack Theatre, carved out of a cliff at Porthcurno, Cornwall

Photographs by Mimi Connolly







Preceding pages: Misty dawn breaks over yellow aeonium flowers and curtains of pink drosanthemum. Facing page: Granite beds with pink *Polygala fruticosus* 'Africana', *Helichrysum thianschanicum* 'White Wonder', red *Dianthus* and tall echiums. Above: The theatre

SOME gardens have the ability to surprise; few have the ability to shock. The terraces above Cornwall's Minack Theatre most certainly do. Carved out of a cliff at Porthcurno on the southern tip of Penwith—or, more accurately, artfully crafted with concrete at a time when building regulations were in their infancy—this outdoor playhouse-without-a-roof owes its existence to Rowena Cade, who owned the land and decided in 1932 that the cliff at the end of her garden would make a perfect theatre.

Since then, between March and October, it has hosted hundreds of disparate productions, from Shakespeare to Coward, musicals to operas, Fisherman's Friends to French farce and, in recent times, has become celebrated for its gardens every bit as much as for its theatrical accomplishments.

Cade did have planted terraces within her auditorium, but they can never have been as spectacular as they are today. Now, their appearance owes thanks to the skills and plantsmanship of Claire Batten and Jeff Rowe, who have been responsible for designing and planting the gardens here since 2019.

Building on the foundations laid by Cade and, more recently, by Niall and Jill Milligan, in charge from the late 1990s to 2018, Ms Batten and Mr Rowe have extended not only the areas of planting, but also the species that find life on a Cornish cliff to their liking. Few British gardens are as exposed as this one, yet the

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south-east-facing aspect, the poor but free-draining granite-based soil and proximity to the temperature-steadying properties of the sea mean that many plants that are too tender to grow in most other places in the British Isles—Tresco on the Isles of Scilly being an exception—not only survive here, but thrive.

The lowest temperature recorded at Porthcurno in recent years was about -6°C in 2008. Snow is exceptionally rare, although, in

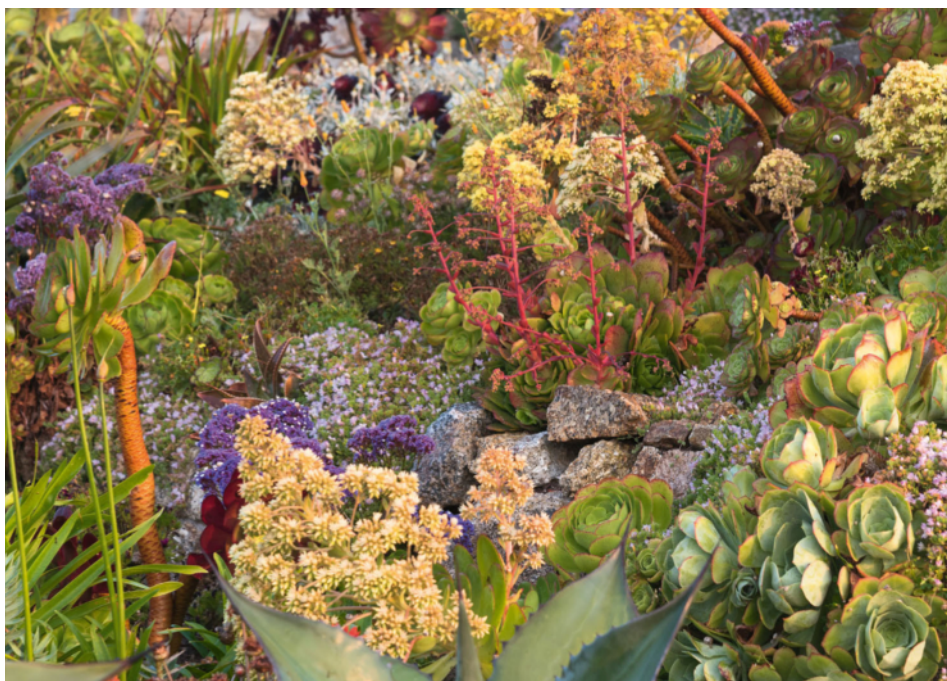
2017/18, the Beast from the East caused some fatalities. In most winters, there is rarely a freeze. Greater challenges come from salt-laden winds and from erosion—hence the importance of terracing. Weather-susceptible lush growth is discouraged by a lack of soil enrichment or feeding. Watering is attended to only in the case of newly planted areas. Once established, the plants must fend for themselves or else be relegated to more inland gardens. Ginger lilies (*Hedychiums*) are a case in point—too demanding of moisture to enjoy a life on the edge. *Brugmansia* (*Datura*) was ‘ripped to shreds’ by the wind.

Care is taken to create small microclimates a yard or so square that are more propitious for growth in this exposed situation, where air and light are vital attributes and shade trees and windbreaks mere wishful thinking.

Ms Batten and Mr Rowe have worked together in partnership for about 20 years, having trained in horticulture and taken over as the proprietors of Trewidden Nursery, a business they bought from the owners of that Cornish estate and which is now mail-order nursery Penberth Plants. Their knowledge of tender ➔



Seat with a view: a granite bench set into the cliff wall, surrounded by flowering succulents, aloes and pink South African drosanthemum



A mix of aeonium hybrids amid the rocks, with the sea lavender, *Limonium perezii*

perennials and succulents has been recognised by the RHS, which awarded them the Lawrence Medal for the best plant display in the Great Pavilion at the Chelsea Flower Show in 2017. I saw it and the award was richly deserved: the plants were astonishingly well grown and beautifully arranged.

Both gardeners are native to the area—Ms Batten is from Penberth and Mr Rowe from St Buryan. Neither of them has travelled far in pursuit of their dream—which is clearly what their nursery and the Minack Theatre garden have become. 'I am so happy here,' says Ms Batten. It is not difficult to see why.

Their nursery is tucked away in the village of St Levan, where plants are propagated and grown in a series of polytunnels. The apparent lack of sophisticated protected cultivation belies the skill needed to raise such a diverse range of tender exotics, from proteas to aeoniums, watsonias to leucadendrons. Ms Batten is the propagator, raising from seed a range of plants that most accomplished gardeners

Minack specials

Proteas South African treasures, the country's national flower, which are normally seen here only in large glasshouses at botanic gardens. Here, even the King Protea, *Protea cynaroides*, can be seen in flower outdoors (*below left*). Admire it at Minack and drool (or gnash your teeth!)

Crassula coccinea A South African perennial succulent, colourful from mid June through July, when its rosy-red flowers arrest the eye. Hardy in very well-drained soil

Delosperma and Drosanthemum Affectionately known as 'the curtains', these trailing South African perennial succulents drape

themselves over huge granite boulders and are smothered in brilliant daisy flowers, seen at their most spectacular on a sunny day. They close up—and rest—at night

Lampranthus Another South African succulent with larger daisy flowers. Hardy in sheltered or coastal gardens and valued for its early-summer brilliance, as here, where bright red *L. 'Tresco Fire'* (*below middle*) grows with euphorbia, aeoniums and *Kumara plicatilis*

Echiums Canary Island natives with immense towering spires of blue or white flowers in the case of the monocarpic *E. pininana*, which dies after flowering, and the perennial *E. fastuosum*, which makes a wide-spreading

shrub decorated with royal-blue candles in summer. The very choice *E. wildpretii* has flowers of rich raspberry red

Lupinus lepidus The Pacific lupin is a low-growing lupin 1ft tall, with silver-grey foliage and short spires of flowers in blue and white from late spring through to summer. *Lepidus* is Latin for 'graceful' and it performs well in the face of salt-laden winds

Aeoniums Rosette-forming succulents from the Canary Islands that here grow to 3ft or more, sending out bright-yellow cone-shaped flower heads over leaf-rosettes of green or purple. 'Cornish Tribute' (*below right*) is a compact variety raised by Ms Batten and Mr Rowe that's ideal for container growing



would find daunting even to germinate. Mr Rowe is involved in plant cultivation, but also takes charge of the thriving email business, together with the landscaping of the theatre garden. 'He's very good with granite,' says Ms Batten. 'I come behind and pretty it.' It is a natural division of labour that works for both of them—leavened with the good-natured teasing and banter that is an intrinsic part of the partnership. They alternate their duties, each spending half the week in the theatre garden and the other half at the nursery.

Planting takes place in spring—so plants have a chance to become established before the onset of summer drought or the chill of winter—and is always undertaken with an eye to longevity and sustainability. There is something to look at from March until Christmas in most years, but such practical considerations are probably overlooked by most visitors, who run out of superlatives when it comes to admiring what they see: 'Otherworldly', 'astonishing' and 'incredibly spectacular'

‘What is it that makes the garden such an assault on the senses?’

are only some of the comments I overheard on my trip there at the end of May this year. I have been visiting this theatre for 30 years now and it has never looked more spectacular.

What is it that makes the Minack garden such a powerful assault on the senses? Firstly, the use of colour. There is clever design here, but neither Ms Batten nor Mr Rowe are afraid of bold shades of cerise and magenta, orange and sunshine yellow. In the clear Cornish cliff-top air, the rugs of vivid-flowered delosperma and lampranthus sing out from the granite boulders over which they drape their succulent stems. Pyramids of bright-yellow aeonium flowers tower above them.

Plantsmen and plantswomen will drool over the flowering proteas and leucadendrons

—particularly the silver tree, *Leucadendron argenteum*, which here grows to a height of 10ft, the sort of scale of which inland gardeners who struggle with them in a frost-free greenhouse can only dream.

Cade died in 1983, but Ms Batten remembers meeting her as a child. 'She was scary,' she admits. I have no doubt that if Cade were to tour her cliff-side theatre garden now, she would be as excited as every other visitor.

Of all the gardens I have visited in my long gardening life, none has left me more impressed with the level of cultivation or elevated by the sheer joy it imparts. The impact is emphasised by the backdrop of a turquoise-blue sea, frequently populated by dolphins, whose leaps into the air seem to celebrate the spectacle. 🐬

Events at the Minack Theatre, Penzance, Cornwall, this year include 'Twelfth Night', July 16–21, and 'Blithe Spirit', July 24–27, regular 'Gardening on the Edge' tours and various concerts. Visit www.minack.com