



Open to the elements

Set among the rugged bluffs of the north-eastern coast of Corfu, native trees and evergreen shrubs link The Kassiochia Estate gardens with the exposed and sun-baked surrounding landscape

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Situated on the north-east coast of the Greek island of Corfu, The Kassiochia Estate gardens blend seamlessly into the wider landscape. Evergreen shrubs and densely planted native trees such as oak, almonds, olives, and wild pears trail along the stone path to the Ionian Sea





Perched on a headland looking out over the Straits of Corfu, The Kassiochia Estate boasts views that are exceptional, even by the elevated standards of the breathtaking north-east coast of the Greek island. Sea, sky and the soaring mountains of Albania in the distance form a glorious backdrop to this ruggedly beautiful bluff.

At the heart of the property is a pale stone villa, rented out to discerning holidaymakers, in which doors and archways have been cleverly positioned to frame vistas like a living artwork. But the house itself is surrounded by a garden that is a living work of art.

The terraces are fringed with a rich mosaic of plants that flow seamlessly into the wider natural landscape. Bold clumps of cistus and thymes, convolvulus and ballota are threaded through with drifts of ornamental grass and *Tulbaghia violacea*, which produces its rich pink flowers for many months of the year. Undulating rivers of plants spill down the hillside away from the house in every direction.

Stone paths wind through these aromatic beds, leading down through an area of semi-wild maquis shrubland to a diverse, native woodland at the boundaries. Specimen trees include almonds, holm oaks, olives and some exceptionally large and beautiful wild pears.

These trees are very old, but the rest of the garden is the work of British-born garden designer Jennifer Gay and her gardener partner, Piers Goldson. She trained at RHS Garden Rosemoor, set in the soft climate of Devon, but was always drawn towards Mediterranean plants. She moved to Greece 15 years ago, and since then has created many gardens, so she had a clear vision of what might be achieved when first visiting the site in 2008. 'The house was newly built and the land around it spread like a blank canvas. The priority was to help blend the buildings back into their surroundings,' says Jennifer.

She began by deciding which parts of the four-acre plot to leave alone. An ancient thicket of *Quercus coccifera* down at the water's edge was one of the natural glories of the site. 'There's a beautiful rocky outcrop here, and we had fun carving paths down to it through the undergrowth. We started at one edge and it became clear where the walkways should be.' Wherever the brambles and overgrowth were cleared, cyclamen, Star of Bethlehem and other dainty natives gradually emerged from the sun-baked earth.

Further up the slope, Jennifer hacked back great thickets of Spanish broom and *Phlomis suffruticosa* – both of which are native but inclined to dominate. 'I wanted to gradually increase the impact of the planting as we got closer to the house. Where we needed height and shade, I used native trees: repeated groups of *Celtis australis*, carob, olive, cypress and *Cercis siliquastrum*, underplanted with Mediterranean evergreen shrubs such as *Arbutus unedo* and *Pistacia lentiscus*. Then I dressed this framework with more obviously colourful species, including helichrysums and lots of pretty, pink gaura,' she explains.

Parts of the site are extremely exposed and temperatures can plummet well below zero in the winter, but in more sheltered corners, Jennifer tucked plum-bago, bougainvillea, jasmine and the white climbing rose 'Iceberg'. 'It is the same 'Iceberg' that people grow in Britain,' says Jennifer. 'But in the Mediterranean it flowers for almost 10 months of the year.'

The ornamental grass that dominates the planting near the house is another British favourite, *Stipa tenuissima*. We value it for its ability to look good into winter, but Corfu's gardeners also rate its ability to stand up to the blistering heat of high summer. 'So many plants aestivate in July and August here,' says Jennifer. 'But stipas continue to look good even when they have dried to russet-tinged skeletons. Caught by the sun in early morning and again in late afternoon, they glow in a quietly beautiful way.'

'Even the colour palette would be familiar to an English gardener. I've used lots of limes and pinks, purple and blue. But here the colours seem brilliant; textures are more pronounced. All your senses are more stimulated. Everything about life in the Mediterranean is more extreme' □

The Kassiochia Estate: 07876-195295; www.kassiochiaestate.com



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