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SWEET RAINWATER, WHERE DO YOU RUN TO?

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SOCIETY OF
GARDEN +
LANDSCAPE
DESIGNERS



MANAGING RUN-OFF
DESIGN SOLUTIONS
FROM THE EXPERTS

POINT OF VIEW
PEAT AND
HORTICULTURE

PLANTING
EDIBLES: A PLANT
SCHEME SUPERPOWER



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Regulations set by regional town halls in Spain dictate not only what percentage of a site can be impermeable but how much can be lawn and ornamental landscaping. Balancing water consumption with temperature radiation and the need for permeable surfaces is key to all Gonzalo's projects, which include Jardín de los Paseos (main picture) and Ático en El Viso, a roof garden in Madrid (above right).



LESSONS ON RAIN FROM SPAIN

A couple of weeks before it officially drew to a close, the Meteorological Office announced that this year's summer in Britain was likely to have been one of the warmest on British record, and that the season's rainfall was tracking below average.

Almost immediately afterwards, our summer was blown away by a succession of thunderstorms, gales and heavy rain, and across the country, trees, shrubs and plants that had prematurely 'gone over' due to the heat were suddenly flush with new, green growth.

These provisional new heat and rainfall records followed what the Met Office has already confirmed has been England's driest spring in more than 100 years, and the driest January to July period since 1929. The conditions are mainly due, it says, to persistent →

Gonzalo Morillo MSGLD designs resilient, weather-wise gardens that stand the test of time. **Arabella St John Parker** finds out more

PHOTOGRAPHS: SILVIA CERRADA

high-pressure systems that often originate from the Azores or mainland Europe.

Global weather patterns are changing fast and the Met Office has forecast that those experienced here in Britain will soon resemble those of a Mediterranean country. The Society of Garden + Landscape Designers (SGLD) declares in its Environmental Action Plan that planted landscapes 'can help us to adapt to and mitigate climate change'.

'To do this,' writes the SGLD's lead for Sustainability, Rachel Bailey, in her Foreword to the Plan, 'will require fundamental changes to the way we approach design and build landscapes and gardens so they have a positive impact on the environment. This will require resources and training and better evidence to guide decision making.'

There are invaluable lessons, experiences and insights that can be learned from designers and landscapers working outside Britain. Among those is Gonzalo Morillo MSGLD, whose projects in Spain, as well as in Greece and Italy, involve him designing gardens for hot, dry summers and wet winters.

'Gardens are the place where my clients hide from the heat and the noise of the everyday,' he says. 'For we Spaniards, a garden is a place of comfort, somewhere we can refresh and relax, an idyll where we can grow our family – family is very, very important in Spain – and for that, the garden must be green.'

As far removed, then, from any natural Spanish landscape that is shaped by hot, dry conditions as you could imagine. 'It's very difficult to make people understand the naturalistic style here,' says Gonzalo. 'They don't understand that their wish for a green garden is a contradiction.'

While, in his view, public comprehension of the changes that he and his team are seeing in Spain's weather patterns is still behind the curve, when it comes to creating gardens and landscapes at least, adjustments towards more sustainable design are being made at a regulatory level.

Aside from the list of invasive plants that cannot be used, while there are no rules generally regarding planting, there are regulations that state what percentages of land can be given over to impermeable areas, to lawn, and to ornamental landscaping. They also declare how much must be preserved as *campo* (natural or wild landscape).

'The laws are set by our regional town halls and are quite restrictive,' Gonzalo explains. 'For example, in one area where I and my team work, only twenty per cent of a total plot can be lawn, and you have to capture water run-off and hold it in a recovery tank. Also, the term *campo* is so broad in meaning that there's often lot of to-ing and fro-ing with the town hall to get a clearer definition.'



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In some places, including Madrid, there is also a rule that affects trees. 'If you cut down or take out a tree, you have to replace it with one tree for every year of the age of the tree that has been removed,' Gonzalo explains. So, if the tree removed was 40 years old, 40 new trees must be planted.

The reason for the restrictions is not so much because of water consumption – 'there's no limit to the amount of water you can use here, as long as you pay for it' – but because of the increased likelihood of water run-off and soil erosion.

'Torrential rains have always been a feature of the Mediterranean climate,' says Gonzalo. 'We normally have huge, huge storms in September and October and in Madrid, for instance, where the soil is mainly clay, we suffer more from rotten roots than from not having water. We haven't had a drought this year and I don't think we're getting less rain overall, but the pattern of rainfall is changing and because we have very bad soil in Spain – there's lots of clay and lime but you'll never find loam – we need to be better at harvesting and using water, and at preserving it for long periods.'

Indeed, Gonzalo believes that working with the soil and the topography of every site is more important perhaps than trying to always use endemic plants. Using the right



Structural plants such as *Phillyrea*, *Myrtus*, *Rhamnus alaternus*, and *Cistus* grow well in Madrid, as do perennials such as *Stachys byzantina*, *Nepeta x faassenii*, *Ballota acetabulosa*, *Phlomis*, and *Calamintha nepeta*.

**'I'VE BEEN WORKING
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water management tools in the right situations is also essential. 'Each project is different and it's important to always start from scratch; soil analysis, SuDS, permeable areas, slopes, structures – be site specific every single time, otherwise you'll be wasting money.'

Green and shady

In Madrid, where temperatures can easily reach 95°F (35°C) and rise as high as 104°F (40°C) during the day in the summer, shade is essential and nowhere more so than on the roof of a townhouse such as his Ático en El Viso project.

'I always try to make these spaces as green as possible,' says Gonzalo. 'We need to balance water consumption with temperature radiation and the need for permeable surfaces and in my opinion, the latter is more important so we aim to use highly efficient irrigation systems and planting such as macrothermal grasses that need very little watering.'

Structural Mediterranean plants such as *Phillyrea*, *Myrtus*, *Rhamnus alaternus*, *Cistus*, sometimes *Buxus*, and *Arbutus* – 'those are our core plants, and we like to use them because they grow properly and make a good hedge design' – are softened with an even split of perennials and grasses and planted in a soil depth of 20cm.

'We've used technical paving, so it floats and there's considerable capacity for a heavy rainfall, and the lighter growing medium, which is better suited to rooftop gardens where weight is a key concern, drains better per cubic metre than that which we'd use in a garden at ground level.'

Meanwhile, the drainage system is in the form of a drip watering system using Geotextile fabric, which makes the garden environment quite humid. 'We've found this works very well in this kind of garden, rather than having grid dripping systems,' says Gonzalo.

'The maintenance of such a garden is high – it has to be looked after every week – but the effort is worthwhile to achieve a cool shady area.'

Working with the land

As a forestry engineer by training, and a passionate lover of nature and the environment by inclination, Gonzalo's design style is first and foremost naturalistic. 'I've been working with endemic species all my career and when someone talks about using them in a garden, it is entirely logical to me; my approach to design is always to work with the ecosystem in which I find myself. It's very intuitive.'

It is particularly telling in Jardín de los Paseos, a garden that he and his team created for a sloping site measuring →



GONZALO MORILLO MSGLD

gained a degree in forestry engineering and on graduation, took up an opportunity to work for a studio in Belgium where he learned about garden design. On his return to Spain, he joined Fernando Caruncho's studio where he worked for seven years as project manager and developer on projects around the world. In 2011 he took the decision to study for his MA at the School of Architecture in Madrid. At the same time, he launched his own studio which has since become Locus Landscape, in partnership with Luisa Olazabal and Louis Ojeda, and he and his team work on private, corporate and residential projects throughout Spain, including the Balearic Islands, and in locations including Paraguay and Italy. locuslandscape.com

WHERE PLANTS ORIGINATE FROM IS AN INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT CONSIDERATION.

flowering meadow and run a single grass path through the trees to a raised seating platform that he designed to stand in the middle of the wood.

'As we didn't want the meadow to look yellow in July, we worked with Pictorial Meadows to create a seed mix using adapted ornamentals and we did install an irrigation system so there can be one watering in July, and two in August, to ensure the flowering extends throughout the summer.

'To emphasise the sense of space, and the views of the woodland, I created the lawn, which covers just five hundred square metres and is perfectly in proportion with the house, the pool and the background of pine trees and holm oaks,' explains Gonzalo.

In the areas where there is more sun, the designer has planted endemic species such as *Phillyrea*, *Arbutus*, and *Cistus*, with ornamental grasses, salvias, cypresses, and lavenders.

'There are some pear trees and *Acer campestre* and some perennials and all the new planting is arranged in beds around the lawn and down the slope towards the house, to take advantage of the run-off from the lawn's irrigation system.'

Water run-off from a small stream that traverses this garden and pools in a depression where, before Gonzalo arrived, there was no drainage, is also now effectively managed to both the designer's and regulatory standards.

Three underground water tanks capture the run-off, with two open tanks filling the third impervious one, which is the long-term storage tank used to irrigate the garden via a drip system. 'The system is connected to the mains, just in case, but there hasn't been an extreme drought in the five or so years since the garden was finished so no supplementation has been necessary so far.'

Designing for the future

While Gonzalo is confident that gardens created by Locus Landscape will still be functioning in 50 or more years' time, he is realistic about the planting. 'There are always new species coming in, especially now we're thinking more about creating naturalistic gardens, and there are species I'd change (*Buxus*, for instance) and some I'd use more – we didn't have *Cistus x heterocalyx* ten years ago but I use it a lot now.'

He and his team are using a lot of adapted ornamentals from places with even drier climates, such as California, and he reveals that he is also working with Cultidelta, a nursery in the north-east of Spain that is cultivating forms of endemic plants from Cyprus and Greece. 'Things are moving very fast here in Spain and we need to keep up.' ●

ENDNOTE

1 Madrid usually has 60 rainy days per year, with most rain falling in October; worlddata.info/europe/spain/climate-madrid.php



107,639 square feet (10,000 sq m) and situated on the outskirts of Madrid. As well as answering his client's brief for some lawn, a swimming pool and seating areas close to the Modernist-style house, Gonzalo wanted to find a way to preserve an existing woodland of holm oaks. 'It had been growing there for many years and I wanted very much to preserve all that beauty,' he recalls.

His solution was to create a narrative for the woodland and to treat it, and the house, as 'full areas' in his design and to counterbalance these with voids – that is, the lawn and swimming pool.

Inspired by the idea of a herd of sheep wandering through a grove of trees and creating a random network of paths as they graze on the grasses growing in the shade there, the designer has underplanted the oaks with a

Lavenders, *Nepetas*, *Cerastium* and *Perovskia atriplicifolia* are among the planting in the beds at Jardín de los Paseos which have been arranged around the lawn and down towards the house, to take advantage of run-off from the irrigation system.

