


Caribbean: Barbados's garden attractions

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An orchid at the Andromeda Garden

One story goes that the first people to glimpse Barbados were Spanish traders, sailing to Brazil. They gave it the Spanish name for “bearded ones” because they saw an island densely wooded with the native banyan or bearded fig trees (*Ficus citrifolia*), so-named for their thick hanging roots.

How different from our first view of Barbados today, I thought, slumped crossly in a taxi from the airport to my hotel. The tired chorus line of tropical horticulture was all there along the roadside: savagely pruned bougainvillea, garishly splattered crotons, and municipal displays on every roundabout of castor-oil plants and coleus. Standard fare, from Bali to Florida, Mauritius to Barbados.

But once I had arrived at Cobblers Cove and had a soothing drink, my eyes began to open to the charms of the place. This comfortable British-owned hotel has a somewhat Fifties retro quality that makes it ideal for a trip focused on heritage rather than the beach - the lounge is stuffed with photo albums of the original house and gardens, evoking the west coast high life for which it is famous.

The villas are set within a densely planted garden: an example of what has been dubbed “tropical Cotswolds.” Lots of different plants are organised into wavy borders, and shrubs are clipped into tight shapes. So far so Home Counties. But the surroundings ooze a bodacious lushness. All those plants that, in British offices, would wilt on filing cabinets, are on a mission here to grow as huge and green as possible.

Even though Barbados tends to sell itself on beaches, rum punches and swimming with turtles, it has a rich horticultural tradition. It is, after all, a country of fertile soils and a long history of growing sugar cane. From plantation houses of the late 1600s, to Oliver Messel mansions dating from the chic Sixties and Seventies,

to more recent public landscape gardens, the island has a range of horticultural hotspots. For this reason, Cobblers Cove is now offering a garden tour package, as owner Hugh Godsall explains:

“We want to attract the kind of guest who wants more than sea, sand and sun. Barbados has an amazing competitive advantage against so many locations. Places like the Maldives and the Seychelles look lovely in photos but, aside from the beach, there is absolutely nothing to do. Most people I know say that such destinations are great the first time, but by the end of a week they are beginning to feel bored. Hardly any go back to the same resort.

“The British in particular are garden-obsessed. What a perfect holiday to mix visits to special and very different gardens, with being pampered in a five-star beachfront hotel.”

I had set myself the independent challenge of finding enough gardens of interest to keep me occupied for four days. (A challenge I later came to regret, as I hardly saw the beach.) At the end of my stay, my impression of Barbados as an environmental burned-out case, dressed up with croton and bouganvillea clichés, had been shot down. The sun, sand and rum punch side of life is there. But if you’ve been to Barbados before and you’d like to see something different, or if you approach travel with just a little curiosity about local traditions and culture, there are gardens here – and gardeners – that will unlock the human history and the natural wonders of the island.

A key contact was Russell Corrie, owner of Nature Care, a garden centre and design business. He builds gardens for the rich and famous and his knowledge of both the natural and social history of Barbados was a huge help – although if you see all the gardens on this list in four days, as we did, you may feel you need another holiday.

Hunte’s Garden and Nursery

As proof that the Bajans take these things seriously, the island’s top-rated attraction on Trip Advisor is a garden owned by Anthony Hunte, a native Bajan whose English ancestors arrived in the 1630s, as indentured servants. The garden is in the centre of the island, about five kilometres from the east coast. Just inside the iron gates, I come across Anthony removing a dead leaf. A huge palm frond has fallen and it takes Anthony and a helper to carry it to the compost heap.

Following on his heels, I soon detect his masterstroke in creating this garden. It is in a sinkhole about 150 feet deep and 500 ft across, a geological curiosity formed by a massive landslip. Hunte took over the site in 1997 and spent two years making a garden in the crater before he opened to the public.

The atmosphere is one of controlled, primitive exuberance. “We aim to stay just one step ahead of the vegetation,” Anthony explains. Plants cascade down the slopes – gingers, aralias, coleus, impatiens and taro, and gather in waist-high drifts at the bottom.

The sides of the giant bowl are terraced with coral stone walls and intricate pathways. Some lead to dead-ends: a fountain shrine, or an overlook with a stone seat. It is a magical and atmospheric place.

The reward for toiling slowly back to the top is the chance to explore Anthony's nursery and the picturesquely ruined outbuildings he has turned into a home. He joins guests on the verandah: the perfect spot to sip a lemonade and look out over the crater. Now in his seventies (check), Hunte has the air of a slightly mischievous bon viveur, but he is Bajan to the core. "I took up gardening in my twenties," he told me. "I learned from my grandmother, who always grew plants for church fairs."

With collections of family pictures and spoof mementoes, a piano concerto tinkling in the background, this is a warm and highly individual welcome that helps to explain why the garden is such a hit. Flora and Foxy, two fluffy little rescue dogs, follow Anthony everywhere. He assures me they can take visitors on a garden tour themselves, should he be unavailable.

Andromeda Botanical Garden

Iris Bannochie (1914 –1988) is renowned for her botanical knowledge (she won the RHS Veitch medal, its highest accolade for plantsmanship) but is mostly remembered by locals for her eccentricities (and liking for a drink). She made this garden at Bathsheba, on the east coast, on land that had been in her family since 1740. The site is littered with huge boulders; it is named after the Greek legend of Andromeda, a maiden who was chained to a rock. Iris donated the garden to the Barbados National Trust after her death.



Bathsheba, on the east coast of Barbados

Iris travelled the world, always looking out for new plants. More than 1,200 species are represented in the garden; about 75 per cent of them, and 90 per cent of the palms, were introduced to Barbados by her.

As I wander around, it is the sea views and the trees that really strike me. Near the entrance is a huge *schleffera*, with octopus-like fruits that attract flocks of native yellow breasts. Further along is a common screwpine (*Pandanus utilis*), a variegated form from Sri Lanka, once used in basket-making. I've noticed it lining the roadsides, usually ragged and forlorn. Here it spreads out, supported by a mass of prop roots, and makes a firework explosion of stripy foliage.

There are beautiful breadfruit trees, introduced by Captain Bligh (of 'Bounty' fame) to feed the slaves, or so legend has it. And the fish poison tree (*Barringtonia asiatica*), which is bat- and moth-pollinated. The seeds are traditionally ground up and used to stun fish in freshwater streams. Everywhere a climber (*Petrea volubilis*) from central America scrambles about, with flowers in purple or white. It is known locally as sandpaper plant because the rough leaves were once used to smooth furniture.

Andromeda is still a centre of learning. Gardeners from the Eden Project in Cornwall are arriving soon to begin a classification project. There are also plans to start a native garden: the forests were cut down over 250 years ago to clear land for sugar cane, which explains why the famous bearded fig is now a rarity, even at Andromeda.

Fisher Pond House

While waiting for John Chandler to answer the bell I admire a fine pair of tree ferns flanking the door of his elegant plantation house. South American macaws squawk in the garden, and glittering chandeliers hang in reception. There's a whiff of glamour in the air.

I soon learn why. John was a good friend of the late Colin Tennant, owner of Mustique. They got to know each other because John used to own the Ocean View hotel, a stopover where anyone (who was anyone) would shack up in luxury for a night or two en route to that most exclusive of islands. He gave up the hotel and moved to Fisher Pond House 16 years ago, but his reputation still draws the great and good for open-house lunches during high season.

The garden is organised as a gallery of spacious rooms. Theatrically decayed statues and fountains bought at local auctions pop up in strategic places. The old driveway is now a paved promenade flanked by John's "English" borders: a riot of busy Lizzies and petunias mingled with gloriosa vine, roses and hibiscus.

John's ethos is typified by a curlicued iron umbrella stand, which once belonged to Randolph Hearst: an accessory for the vines dangling over the portico. Coral stone walls and terraces ripple out from the house. Lunch is served against a background of frog croaks and birdsong, rather than breaking waves. Book in advance.

Bentham's House

Helen Knighton's home is a place of dedicated plantsmanship. She's a personality most British gardeners would recognise - a small nursery owner with encyclopedic plant knowledge and firm opinions, generous with her advice (she runs a blog, *My Rustic Bajan Garden*) and her plants.

An old plantation house, Bentham's majors in waterlilies and anything else that Helen is currently interested in. Between polytunnels, shade houses and borders, this adds up to a lot of plants; she seems to have grown everything.

Noticeable are the raised concrete ponds filled with colourful waterlilies. The 2ft-high walls keep out frogs, which are not the quiet sort we are used to: "At night it sounded as though someone was mowing the grass," says Helen.

In this plot, giant plants rub shoulders with experiments and collections. The driveway is dominated by an enormous tamarind tree with ferns growing in the folds of its trunk. Beside this, in a pot, sits an anthurium from the Amazon, like a houseplant prop from Honey I Shrunk the Kids. In another spot is one of the best Bismarckii palms I've ever seen.

I notice a bronze-leaved ground cover with mauve flowers. "Martinique Kofia," she says. "It's not green, so not popular with clients," she adds with a sigh.



Sugarcane fields in south west Barbados

Windblown, St Philip

The organisation that draws all these different gardens and gardeners together is the Barbados Horticultural Society (BHS), which wins gold at Chelsea Flower Show every year.

Orson Daisley, a retired police officer, will be its president in 2013. He and his wife Madeline are based at the appropriately named Windblown on the south coast, away from the tourist hotspots and not an easy place to garden. They have to deal with a keen salt wind, sandy thin soil and only 40 inches of rainfall a year. This is a niche for a different plant palette from the lush inland look. They have created an immaculate garden, using drought-tolerant Mediterranean plants. It will be on the BHS open gardens tour this season, an annual event (see box) and big weekend in the social calendar, along with the BHS show, also in January.

The Daisleys only moved in six years ago (having worked in Bermuda for many years), but lost no time getting to grips with the garden. A system for collecting rainwater was a must, and Orson planted a windbreak oleander hedge with a groundcover of variegated zeezee plant (*Zamioculcas zamiifolia*, familiar to us as a tough houseplant) as a salt-tolerant barrier. It has done a quick job of sheltering the garden.

As with many gardening marriages, the couple have separate areas. Orson claims the vegetable garden, while Madeline has colonised sunny corners with her prize-winning collection of cacti and succulents. She has sculpted mini desertscapes, using variegated crown of thorns, sansieveras, and desert roses with their bulbous trunks.