

The Dry Garden is a 'meadow' of plants from similar climate conditions around the world, including American agaves, African euphorbias and grasses.

In brief

WHAT Contemporary oasis garden with luxuriant plantings.

WHERE Dar Igdad, near Taroudant in southern Morocco.

SIZE Two acres.

SOIL Silty.

CLIMATE Semi-desert, frost-free,

average annual rainfall 250mm

(compared to around 600mm in the

driest parts of Britain); summer

temperatures up to 50°C.

SPECIAL FEATURES Unusual, drought-

tolerant plantings by French designers

Arnaud Maurières and Éric Ossart.

Welcome to the oasis

In the semi-arid landscape of southern Morocco, earthen walls enclose a lush garden retreat

WORDS LOUISA JONES PHOTOGRAPHS LE SCANFF-MAYER



LEFT Soft, pinkish plumes of fountain grass contrast with long spiny stems of *Cylindropuntia subulata*, from high altitudes in Peru and Ecuador (see also overleaf); yellow flower spikes of *Aloe vera*, which Éric and Arnaud brought from Tunisia; and jagged blue leaves of the common agave, *A. americana*, from Mexico.

BOTTOM LEFT A simple rectangular swimming pool inspired by the irrigation pools found in oases. Like traditional Moorish gardens, the building at the end is designed to be reflected in the pool.

BOTTOM RIGHT A series of stone pathways skirts the house, connecting small courtyards with plenty of places to sit and enjoy the garden.

In 2003, Arnaud Maurières and Éric Ossart began designing gardens in southern Morocco. Their career in France had already been rich and varied. They had participated in the beginnings of both the Courson Plant Fair and the Chaumont Garden Festival before creating many innovative French public gardens (see opposite page). Both men have explored the north and south shores of the Mediterranean, collecting baskets, pottery, carpets and tent hangings. They are fascinated by the way people have lived traditionally, simply and ecologically, indoors and out. Their gardens are all sensuous, taking inspiration from Persian paradise gardens. Arnaud considers that Taroudant, which enjoys both the cooling breezes from the Atlantic Ocean some 40 miles to the west, and the ochre light of the Sahara to the south, is nevertheless essentially Mediterranean, “a world of earth and wind, of farming and irrigation, of fresh running water, of fruit swollen with sugar and sun, and fragrant flowers.”

In Taroudant, the pair began specializing in rammed earth construction, building a series of compounds where earthen enclosures create intricate patterns around enclaves of unusual plantings. Houses and gardens interpenetrate; the view opens skywards. These oases are full of warm, vibrant colours, rich fragrance and irregular textures that blur the strongly graphic layout. Their geometries are never severe. Rammed earth is the local vernacular, practised by skilled craftsmen, so that lines are never quite parallel and surfaces usually rough. Flat spaces are constantly subdivided to create mystery, variety and pleasure-giving shade. Yet there is no confusion, all is harmony. Planes, volumes and colours are carefully balanced in the manner of one of the designers’ great models, the Mexican architect Luis Barragán. The Brazilian Roberto Burle Marx and Geoffrey Bawa of Sri Lanka have also inspired them.

Dar Igdad (the name means ‘the house of the birds’ in Berber) was begun in 2007 on the site of a former olive grove. Like the



Gardens to visit
 Dar Igdad is not open to visitors, but nearby is Dar Al Hossoun, a large and varied garden that Arnaud and Éric originally designed for themselves in a similar style, and which is now a garden spa (www.alhossoun.com); and in the centre of Taroudant is Dar Louisa, another guest house rebuilt by Arnaud and Éric : (www.dar-louisa.com). The pair have also designed many gardens in France, some of which are open to visitors. These include gardens of the Cluny Museum (pictured) in Paris (www.musee-moyenage.fr).
 • For details of all Maurières and Ossart gardens that can be visited, see www.maurieres-ossart.com

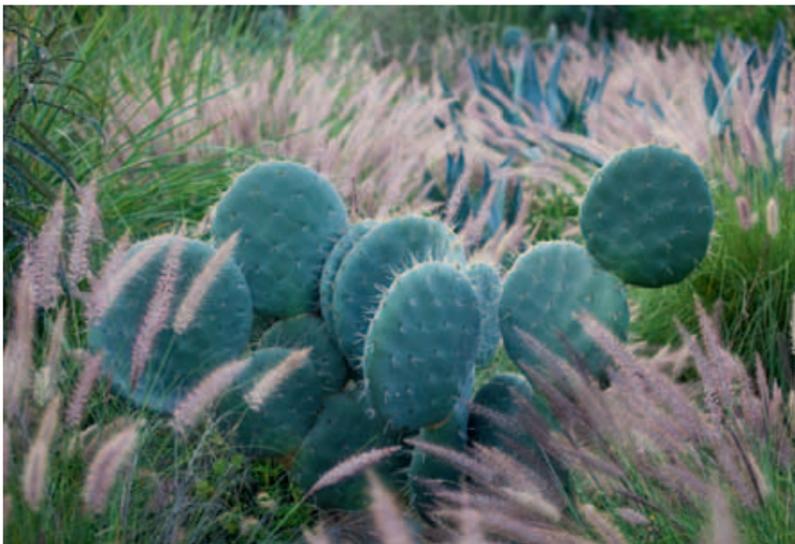
others, it is surrounded by high earthen walls in a rich mahogany colour, against which still stand many of the original multi-trunked trees. The Parisian clients wanted a place for family holidays with room to invite friends. Everything was kept simple, logical and economical; for example, earth dug out to make the walls left holes that were used to make pools, the main one for swimming.

A series of intimate spaces
 The house is arranged in a long line facing the Atlas mountains, and approached via an elegant entry courtyard. The olive trees here were moved from their original positions in the garden to form a grid of nine (see page 38). Openings in the walls allow glimpses of the amazing dry garden beyond. Along the house is a series of patios: an elegant, shallow pool; a rose garden; a courtyard shaded by palms extending the living room. The children’s patio is planted with banana and fragrant citron trees, a local crop. Other small courtyards serve ▶

THIS PAGE, TOP LEFT The purple-tinged flower spikes of fountain grass (*Pennisetum setaceum*) are woven through the planting for much of the year. In the UK this species sometimes perishes during wet British winters, so is often grown as an annual. In some parts of the world, though – including Australia, Tenerife, Hawaii and western USA – it’s considered invasive.

TOP RIGHT The orchard includes fig and pomegranate trees. This area, and the rose garden, are the only ones to be watered regularly.

RIGHT The wheel cactus (*Opuntia robusta*) is a Mexican species that bears yellow flowers and barrel-shaped, deep purple, fleshy fruits.





A grid of nine multi-stemmed olive trees underplanted with marigolds shades the entrance courtyard.
LEFT The building is new, but a traditional old door adds character.

▷ the guest wing to the east and another, shaded by the canopy of a bead tree (*Melia azedarach*), is for the kitchen staff. Depending on the season, meals are usually taken in the palm courtyard or under the pergola near the swimming pool. Roof terraces offer the best mountain views and provide cool places to sleep in the summer heat.

In this garden of many delights, food-producing plants are given a star role. All of Arnaud and Éric's Moroccan gardens have orchards with many different kinds of fruit, including papayas, many types of citrus, pomegranates, figs and Japanese loquats. At Dar Igdad, the orchard is a square set in a meadow.

The dry garden

The most sensational feature of Dar Igdad is the dry garden, which covers three quarters of an acre. Here there is plenty of evidence of Arnaud and Éric's frequent planthunting trips to Asia, Africa and Central America, gathering seeds and cuttings. Madagascar has

been a particularly rich source. The pair sow and grow themselves, often sharing with nurseries. In the dry garden, they mix American cacti and agaves with North African euphorbias and aloes, all set off by drought-tolerant grasses, some of which grow locally and hence are well used to desert conditions. Éric particularly likes fountain grass (*Pennisetum setaceum*), which grows in generous drifts, and thatching grass (*Hyparrhenia hirta*). It's worth noting that both these grasses can be invasive in some parts of the world, though not in the UK.

Watered regularly during the first year, every two months in its second year and four times in its third, the dry garden now gets no extra water at all. Winter rains make it exuberant, but in summer, the dry grasses create an ochre setting for the spectacular succulents.

The dry garden seems to sum up the Arnaud and Éric's joined-up approach. As Arnaud puts it, "Each element – construction material or plant – has been chosen locally or in regions with similar climates, for perfect adaptation to the site, as well as for ecological suitability." □

Drought-tolerant plants

Four spectacular species that will survive dry spells but need protection from cold, wet weather



Cylindropuntia subulata Eve's needle cactus (after its fierce white spines), is from high altitudes in Peru and Ecuador, and develops a dramatic, multi-branching shape in time.



Caesalpinia gilliesii Known (like several other plants) as bird of paradise, this shrub from Argentina and Uruguay grows 3-4m tall, bearing striking flowers in July and August. Hardy above 5°C.



Solanum pyracanthos The porcupine tomato, from Madagascar, bears small purple flowers and dramatic blue-green leaves with orange spines. It's tender, but can be grown as an annual.



Opuntia ficus-indica The barbery fig is an important farm crop in many parts of the world, including Morocco. It flowers in May and bears sweet fruit from August. Hardy above 3-5°C.



“Each element has been chosen locally or in regions with similar climates, for perfect adaptation to the site”

The shrub *Lantana camara* flowers from late spring to late autumn. This native of tropical areas of the Americas needs protection if grown in the UK as it is tender below 10°C.