

Plymouth Characters & Culture

Torquay Walk Through Time

Sidmouth An Offbeat View

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A large, healthy agave plant with thick, pointed, blue-green leaves is the central focus. It sits on a stone wall or ledge. Behind it, a white house with a dark roof is visible against a blue sky with light clouds. To the right of the agave, there are tall, feathery grasses and other green plants. In the foreground, there are variegated plants with green and yellow stripes.

This huge agave
was rescued after
seven years
without water

Bananas & Bromeliads

A quarter-acre garden in Torquay is really pushing the boundaries when it comes to growing tender plants outside. Words and pictures by Jan Barwick



For a plant enthusiast like Maciej Pomian-Srzednicki, moving from Bognor Regis to the more equable climate of Torquay 13 years ago posed all sorts of new growing possibilities, but what he didn't know was just how exceptional the site of his new home would prove to be.

Maciej (pronounce his name 'Mashay') and his wife, Ewa, live at Southern Comfort, an Art Deco-style house on a steep, sunny, south-facing slope in thecombe running east down to Meadfoot beach. It's completely protected from the prevailing south-westerly winds and from all but the most vicious easterlies. It rarely suffers from frosts.

Their aim was to create a garden with an exotic feel, so out went the patchwork of lawns, the roses, the fruit trees, holly bushes and mop-head hydrangeas. A few things they retained – the Chusan palms (*Trachycarpus*) and the misnamed Torbay or cabbage

palms, *Cordyline australis* (which isn't a palm tree at all). "The cabbage palm needs a mild climate to flower, but when it does it fills the garden with fragrance. I wouldn't be without these trees, because of the generally exotic feel they confer," Maciej said. They then started the planting with species that have a reasonably foreign appearance but which are tough – like the Canary Island date palm (*Phoenix canariensis*), tree ferns (*Dicksonia antarctica*), eucalyptus, bamboos and other robust species with large leaves that convey the tropical look, such as fatsia and catalpa.

However, it wasn't long before they realised that the circumstances at Southern Comfort would allow for much more than hardy exotics, and since then Maciej has been pushing the boundaries of what's possible, growing different varieties of palm, banana, bromeliad, aloe and agave. At the same time he incorporates more familiar and commonly grown plants into the

Above left
Common but exotic looking are these belladonna lilies *Amaryllis belladonna*

Above right
A hybrid *Epiphyllum* provides a colourful splash on the cliff behind the house

Below left
Maciej in his 'rainforest'

Below right
Exotic *Eucomis* and *Aloe cooperi* flowers





Left Texas sotol *Dasylirion texanum*

Below left More common in warm conservatories, this *Strelitzia reginae* has been growing against a south-facing wall, although the last two years have inhibited its flowering



schemes, so camellia and ceanothus rub shoulders quite happily with cannas and crinums.

How have his semi-tropical species coped with the last two chilly winters? "Many of the plants can take a hit if it doesn't last too long, but I did lose a few things, like a *Washingtonia* and a *Syagrus* and a few others. But I just let things take their chance. I don't offer specific protection or move things under glass, but just choose the correct position for them in the first place and give them the right soil conditions. This *Strelitzia* (bird-of-paradise plant), for example, is against a south-facing wall with very well-drained soil. I feed it in the summer, and it's flowered prolifically in the past." But the past two winters have affected it, and it's sulked and refused to flower.

It's this understanding of what plants need that makes for success. Southern Comfort has several very distinct microclimates, all in a space that's no more than a quarter of an acre in size, and conditions vary

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enormously from one part to another, even those separated by just a metre or two.

Below the house the slope is relatively gentle and bisected by a wide drive, but the two sides are very different. To the west is what Maciej lightly calls his 'rainforest'. He has piped one of the two springs from behind the house to a circular pool, which overflows down a waterfall into a little rill. This eventually spills over into the adjacent beds so the whole area is constantly moist. Even in very dry spells the spring has never dried up, and plants that love humid conditions flourish. It's a real jungle in miniature, with *Dicksonia*, Chinese rhubarb (*Rheum palmatum*), *Tetrapanax* and the ostrich feather fern, *Matteuccia struthiopteris*. You could almost expect tree frogs to be croaking from the vegetation, but instead Maciej makes do with common toads and palmate newts, which thrive here.

On the other side of the drive it's much drier,



PHOTO: DR MACIEJ POMIAN-SRZEDNICKI

Above *Dicksonia antarctica* provide moist shade at the edge of the 'rainforest'
Below The Mediterranean terraces behind the house

If you're an exotica enthusiast, the garden at Southern Comfort will give you plenty of ideas



nipponicum), holly ferns (*Cyrtomium fortunei*) and the miniature hosta 'Surprised by Joy'. Splashes of colour come from the epiphytic cactus *Epiphyllum* and the pretty *Begonia sutherlandii*, while a cymbidium orchid has grown from tiny over the last two years and he is hopeful that this too will flower. What is otherwise the bane of Maciej's life, the ubiquitous all-covering, mind-your-own-business (*Helxine soleirolia*), provides an attractive emerald backdrop to these more decorative additions and is kept under control by removing the occasional handful as he's passing.

The much steeper terrace above the house at the back is being developed as a Mediterranean garden to fit with the hot and superficially arid conditions (although the two springs that rise here mean that there's plenty of water flowing underneath the soil). Here Maciej allows wild strawberries to grow rampantly as a nod to his Polish origins. "They're an East European delicacy and my wife collects as many as she can when they're fruiting. They're delicious."

Two particular specimens dominate the slope directly above the house – a Texas sotol (*Dasylirion texanum*), an architectural desert succulent that sends up tall spikes of yellow flowers, which the local press come to photograph because it's rarely seen flowering outside, and a huge agave with an unusual history. "It came from my parents' house. My father took the original offset home from a holiday we had in Spain when I was seven. He died in 1990 and my mother, who didn't like agaves, got rid of them all. When she moved house, I found this one under the greenhouse staging that she'd missed. It hadn't been watered for seven years and was all dried up. I put it in a bucket of water and miraculously green shoots appeared and it started to grow." That neglected agave is now about two metres high with a three metre spread, proof that you should never chuck out a plant just because you haven't watered it for seven years and it looks dead... If you're an exotica enthusiast, the garden at Southern Comfort will give you plenty of ideas on what you can feasibly grow outside in sheltered corners in Devon, and Maciej is a mine of information about detail. □

Southern Comfort is in Meadfoot Sea Road, Torquay. From Torquay Harbour take the Babbacombe road past the clock tower and turn right at the first traffic lights. The garden is 200m beyond the brow of the hill on the left. It's open by appointment, ideally for groups (minimum 5, maximum 15) until the end of October. For more information call 01803 201813.