

Albarda gardens, a haven of sustainability and conservation

La Albarda Garden in Pedreguer, is a surprising patch of green on the edge of La Sella. It belongs to Fundem, a foundation dedicated to the conservation of the Mediterranean flora and fauna and its 50,000m² lies between two emblems of Mediterranean coastal development: an urbanisation and a golf course; but once you are inside its gates you enter a different world.



Normally the garden is open to the public only on the last Saturday of each month, but at a presentation given at a recent Agenda21 meeting in Xàbia we heard that it was possible to arrange group visits on Sundays. We therefore decided to get some friends together and arrange a Sunday guided tour. Such was the interest that the anticipated group of ten to fifteen grew to a group of 40 friends of friends. This unexpected number unsettled our guide, Paul Pruden, since ideally they would try to allocate one guide to groups of 15. However he coped well, shepherding us through the maze of paths which criss-cross the garden, and explaining its "raison d'être".

We were surprised to discover that the mature garden and its charming traditional-style house were only 30 years old. It was originally the property of Mr Enrique Montoliu, who switched his earlier passion for palm trees to creating a garden planted with only Mediterranean species. The result is beautiful, diverse and low maintenance.

The core area near the house is a formal Valencian garden with citrus groves and hedges of box (*Buxus sempervirens*, Boje) and myrtle (*Myrtus communis*, Mirto) lining the symmetrically arranged paths. Other areas are conserved as examples of natural local environments, including a "mini Montgó" rockery. This man-made mountain is home to several important indigenous species, transplanted (with permission of course) from the Montgó Natural Park.

Rough paths lead visitors through different types of cool, shady woods. Some, more humid, reminiscent of the micro-climate in a barranco. One exposed rocky area had been scraped completely clear of vegetation and was now being left alone for the natural recolonisation of plants to occur.

Everywhere there are ponds with fish and frogs and flowing water. But this is not an extravagance, since the water which circulates continuously is recycled irrigation water. We were interested to learn that the natural areas of the garden are a focus of study by students from the University of Valencia who come to monitor plant growth and the gradual change of species diversity in a controlled conservation area. New projects, such as the introduction of boxes to encourage the nesting of bats are being pursued. The

garden also doubles up as a location for summer concerts.

Snr Montoliu has now almost completely handed over his property to the conservation charity which bears his name: FUNDEM (La Fundación Enrique Montoliu), though he still lives there and gave us the honour of greeting us when we arrived. Our guide, Paul, explained that the objective of this charity, established in 1996, is to purchase ecologically valuable land and to promote its conservation and management. The charity depends entirely on donations and membership fees to pursue its objectives, and seeks active support from the public. Several of our group were inspired to sign up as members at the end of the tour and look forward to visiting other Fundem projects and the gardens again soon. Perhaps next time we shall not get lost when trying to find our way back to the entrance !

For more on FUNDEM and the gardens see:

<http://fundem.org/index0.html> and <http://blogfundem.blogspot.com/>

and on Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Fundacion-Enrique-Montoliu/272329999158>

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