

# GROW THE MED at home!

There's no need to forget about those fantastic holiday plants when many can thrive in your own garden

Words Jim Cable

A holiday in the Mediterranean may free you of the weekly gardening chores, but it probably won't stop you thinking about plants.

Whether you spend time admiring plantings by the pool, visit public gardens or ramble in wilder terrain, there inevitably comes the question "I wonder if I can grow that at home?", but once back in the UK our ponderings may be forgotten.

But that's a shame because the answer to that question is often a resounding 'yes!' Growing a plant we first spotted abroad can help us recapture moments of our holiday mood and add a new dimension to our British plots.

## Living sculptures

The architectural nature of typical Mediterranean planting may not be the first thing that strikes you on holiday but it's an important characteristic and one we can incorporate to good effect into our gardens back home. In Mediterranean climates many evergreen shrubs grow in tight domes, kept in check by drought and grazing goats. In a garden setting clipped evergreens achieve the same feel and give structure among looser planting. Small-leaved hebes, box, ballota, cistus, santolinas and lavenders can all form these living 'rocks'.

The classic Tuscan landscape is punctuated with tall Italian cypresses. Strong verticals work in a garden, too, by contrasting with rounded shrubs and acting as focal points. A note of caution here! In our wetter climate the Italian cypress produces softer growth. Heavy rain and snow can bend branches down, leading to a very dishevelled silhouette. Either be prepared to wire in branches close to the main trunk and keep them clipped during the growing season, or grow another evergreen which gives a similar effect. *Taxus baccata* 'Fastigiata', *Chamaecyparis lawsoniana* 'Ellwoodii' and *Juniperus scopulorum* 'Blue Arrow' all fit the bill.

No plant shouts 'holiday' more than a palm tree. The date palm, *Phoenix canariensis*, dominates many a hotel's front garden with its fountain of fronds. In the UK it needs winter protection in all but the mildest of spots, but makes a handsome, if increasingly cumbersome, container plant. For a permanent plant in the open garden go for a hardy Chusan palm, *Trachycarpus fortunei*, or a European fan palm, *Chamaerops humilis*.

The imposing succulent *Agave americana*, originally from Mexico, is seen all around the Mediterranean basin. A hard frost

will turn their rosette of leaves to mush but it's worth bedding them out for the summer and protecting in winter for their striking presence in the landscape. Be sure to prune off the vicious spines that tip the leaves if children are around.



Hummocks of santolina are easy to keep



Mediterranean plantings are not only beautiful but often drought-tolerant, too

For great offers on palms, bougainvilleas and oleanders visit the GN Shop [www.gardennewsshop.co.uk](http://www.gardennewsshop.co.uk)



*Trachycarpus fortunei* is a reliable garden plant



Try some easy clipped hebes



Grasses, lavender and santolina make a winning combination



*Agave americana*



Cistus gives structure and beautiful flowers

## Hot colours

An ivy-leaved pelargonium spilling out of a terracotta wall pot screams Mediterranean. *Pelargonium peltatum* 'Tornado Red' can be sown in September. Young plants are easily overwintered on a sunny windowsill, then planted out next May for a riot of crimson. Lantanas are a common garden plant in the Mediterranean basin. Most are classed as a tender perennial in our climate so need overwintering in a frost-free environment with lots of natural light. 'Miss Huff' and 'Chapel Hill Gold' are hardy down to -5C (23F). Pinch out growing points to keep them bushy. Bougainvillea is another quintessential Mediterranean garden plant. They're originally from tropical and subtropical parts of South America but don't think that makes them too tricky for UK culture. Grow in terracotta pots and treat them as you would a pelargonium, although you'll need more space indoors in the winter for them. A heated conservatory is the ideal. Bougainvillea flower on new



Make room for a bougainvillea!



*Pelargonium peltatum* is chic and easy to grow



Lantanas bring holiday colours home



Potted oleander in full sunshine

wood so cut them back after each flush of blooms. If they get chilly during the winter they drop their leaves but soon green up again when temperatures rise. Oleanders grow wild around the Med. The many types available are usually hybrids and their flowers, which are often scented, come in a wide range of colours. They can survive several degrees of frost but it's best to grow in pots and give winter protection. During the summer give all these hot performers plenty of water and feed with tomato food to keep the flowers coming.



Pencil cypresses evoke true Mediterranean planting

## Mediterranean bounty

● A fig tree can give a worthwhile harvest back home. Plant a named variety against a sunny wall.

'Brown Turkey' is the classic choice for a bumper crop in a British garden. 'Brunswick' is another hardy one with large, sweet fruit. It's a good idea to restrict the roots by lining the sides of the planting pit with paving slabs. Trick the plant into thinking it's in a rocky gorge and it'll favour fruit production over foliage. Growing in a container has a similar effect and allows you to move it into a shed or garage over winter if you live in a very cold area. Leave the pea-sized fruitlets produced in late summer on the plant to swell and ripen the following year.

● If you can grow a fig you can grow a pomegranate. The variety 'Provence' is surprisingly tolerant

of our cold winters when grown in a sheltered position or, again, it can be grown in a large container and given winter protection.

● If you've enjoyed sipping a chilled drink under the shade of a grapevine on holiday then recreate the experience in your garden. Vines like a poor soil so don't add manure or fertilisers, but they're sun lovers, so train against a south-facing wall or over a sunny pergola or arch. You could even make a mini vineyard. The seedless varieties 'Himrod' and 'Lakemont' are reliable white dessert grapes for the UK. 'Chasselas Rosé Royal' is a seeded, old French variety that can be relied on in the UK for a crop of sweet fruit for dessert use or to make rosé wine. For a similarly versatile red grape go for 'Gagarin Blue'.



Grapevines can be trained into manageable structures or grown in greenhouses



Grapevines need plenty of sun

Buy fig 'Brown Turkey' or a pomegranate bush at the GN Shop  
[www.gardennewsshop.co.uk](http://www.gardennewsshop.co.uk)



Yes, you can grow pomegranates in the UK!



Leave pea-sized figs to grow over winter



'Brown Turkey' is a well-known, reliable fig variety

## Shades of grey

If there's one tree that characterises the Mediterranean landscape it's the olive. They also grow really well in the microclimate of London and in sheltered UK gardens. Elsewhere they sometimes limp along, never quite recovering from a cold spell in winter. *Elaeagnus 'Quicksilver'* is much tougher, and while deciduous, gives a similar light and silvery effect during the summer months. Or grow the beautiful *Eucalyptus kybeanensis* – well adapted to the British climate and relatively small and slow growing for a eucalyptus. It's available from [www.kingsbarntrees.co.uk](http://www.kingsbarntrees.co.uk).



*Elaeagnus 'Quicksilver'* is robust

## Don't bring plants back!

In theory it's still legal to bring a wide range of plant material back to the UK from EU countries, but there are restrictions on certain plants so you need to be absolutely sure of what's in your luggage. Also, it should be pest and disease free and any gardener knows that's hard to be sure of. Best to stick to the advice issued by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs – "Don't Risk It".

Many plants with a Mediterranean feel are available at an average garden centre and more unusual subjects can be sourced from specialist nurseries.