

# Acting with aloes

The Minack Theatre gardens in Cornwall feature many surprising, often tender plants, yet here they thrive in one of the most exposed maritime positions imaginable

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Photography: **Tim Sandall**

Thespians and garden lovers in equal measure are inspired by the Milligans' plantings at Minack Point, 5 miles round the coast from Lands End.

A few yards from the sandy beach at Porthcurno, where once most of the British Empire's network of telegraph cables came ashore, is a theatre cut out of the granite cliff. It is an amphitheatre with a backdrop of nothing but the waves below. Today, amateur companies come from all over Britain to perform at Minack and visitors

from all over the world come to see not only the theatre, but also its garden, which is fast becoming one of Cornwall's many horticultural attractions.

The theatre at Minack was the brainchild and passion of Rowena Cade (1893–1983) who, with her widowed mother, moved to Cornwall from Cheltenham in the 1920s.

Initially a curiously rocky space chosen for a one-off performance of *The Tempest*, the clifftop location eventually became an outdoor theatre; Cade herself helped haul stones and cement to create the terraced auditorium and stage.

As any amateur company who has played at Minack will testify, it can be a stormy spot and is hardly the place one would choose

to make a garden. *Carpobrotus edulis* (Hottentot fig) had made itself at home here, although now best avoided due to its all too invasive habit in many coastal areas. Nevertheless, its success paved the way for other less-troublesome succulent plants.

## Today's garden

Niall and Jill Milligan were taken on to create a garden around a new cafe in 1998, since when it has spread to encompass the entire environs and become a full-time project. Today's inspired planting is beyond anything Rowena Cade could have imagined – before, there was only a patch of grass among the concrete. The garden now covers around 6,000sq m (1½ acres) and fills every cranny of the auditorium, spilling out above the cliffs to the car park and approaching lane – and made with an extraordinary range of plants amassed from all over the world, many raised from seed.

Minack offered just the kind of opportunity the Milligans were looking for. >>



Cornish cliff garden

The couple have long been involved in gardening projects in Cornwall; their great interest is in succulents and dry-climate plants. For years they had admired La Mortola at Menton and the Jardin Exotique at Eze, in the south of France. Every winter they travel to see family in the USA and visit gardens around Santa Barbara and San Diego. Minack has wonderful light and drainage, and a (normally) frost-free climate, things it shared with the Abbey Garden Tresco in the 1850s before the island’s sheltering trees grew up. Winds on the next headland to Minack have gusted to a hurricane force 137mph; summer can be baking hot by the cliff, winter foggy for days on end – and always there is salt spray.

Signature plants

Stepping into the auditorium you are met immediately by Minack’s signature plants: aeoniums and aloes. A 1.8m (6ft) specimen of *Aeonium balsamiferum* (one of more than 40 different *Aeonium* here) scents the air with honeyed fragrance from its foliage, and a fine *Aloe arborescens* stands proud with toothed foliage. There are some 150 agaves in the garden; *Agave attenuata*, its flowers like elephant’s trunks, is planted under an overhanging rock, in case hail marks its soft new foliage. Many succulents develop rosettes of foliage, and plenty can be seen throughout the garden, not just aeoniums, agaves and aloes but also *Dasyllirion*, *Furcraea*, *Puya*, *Beschorneria* and *Fascicularia*. The garden has other trademark genera. *Agapanthus* lines many paths and holds together the shifting



soil, while purple-flowered *Hebe x franciscana* seeds around, seemingly impervious to the gales. The Milligans use signature plants of more short-term nature, too. Blue pimpernel (*Anagallis monellii*) and California poppy (*Eschscholzia californica*), gazanias and sea lavender (*Limonium perezii*) spread around, as do biennials such as *Geranium maderense*, with huge rounded heads of pink-mauve flowers, and statuesque *Echium pininana*, producing 3.6m (12ft) totems of azure blooms. Bulbs play a major role in maintaining colour. *Scilla peruviana*, with domed heads of sapphire-blue in spring, grows in great clumps, its bulbs visible on the surface. Freesias and magenta-flowered *Gladiolus communis* subsp. *byzantinus* thrive, as do watsonias, late-flowering *Amaryllis belladonna* and starry *Ornithogalum arabicum*. Nerines

The planted cliffs at Minack (above) look wonderful all year; in winter aloes produce pokers of flower, while in May carpeting succulents bear sheets of dazzling daisy blooms. Agaves jostle with aeoniums, pink *Lampranthus* and blue *agapanthus* in late summer (right).

take off here simply by poking them into a crack between rocks. Many of the sun-baked retaining walls are clad in falling, single-colour sheets of varied ice plants, in particular *Lampranthus* and *Drosanthemum*; the more invasive *Carpobrotus* is now kept to the margins of the garden where it gives way once more to gorse and heather.

Silver trees and cacti

Neil and Jill brought soil into the upper areas of the garden as there was none; here *Hedychium* (ginger lilies), restios and shimmering *Leucadendron argenteum* (silver

tree) flourish. Also at home and beginning to flower are *Banksia integrifolia*, *Leucospermum cordifolium* and *Protea grandiceps* – these choice, southern-hemisphere plants only thrive in the UK in mild, open sites with poor, acidic soils. There are treasures everywhere at Minack; many are a surprise outdoors: a yellow *Clivia* in a shady rock crevice, cacti *Opuntia stenopetala* (syn. *O. grandis*) and *Cereus repandus* thriving in sun; the flattened leaves of Old World *Aloe plicatilis* and spiny New World *Agave horrida* sitting happily side by side. Jill and Niall Milligan’s plantings at Minack are a continuing experiment with new species constantly added. Some thrive, some do not. But it is a fascinating garden to watch. ●

VISITING INFORMATION  
The Minack Theatre, Porthcurno, Penzance, Cornwall TR19 6JU; 01736 810181; www.minack.com  
Open: all year except during performances.



Surprising survivors

*Leucadendron argenteum* (silver tree), from Cape Province in South Africa, is one of Minack’s surprising successes, along with *Strelitzia reginae* (bird of paradise) and an *Oreocereus celsianus* cactus so well established that it bears lichens. *Leucadendron* grows naturally on heavy acidic gravels, well-drained but with plenty of water, so Minack suits it well. Young specimens, planted out small, are slow to establish, but enjoy the fierce air movement and are entirely salt-tolerant. They are never fed. The normal winter temperatures, between -1 and 10°C (30 to 50°F) suits silver trees well, but a frosty and snowy winter four years ago killed larger, more exposed specimens, as well as dragon trees (*Dracaena draco*) and many of the succulent aeoniums.



Blue *Anagallis monellii* mingles with a fleshy-leaved *Aloe*.



Gardeners Niall and Jill Milligan have transformed the site since 1998.



Fleshy aeoniums proliferate in the free-draining, sunny conditions.