

REEP's PROJECT AT LE FOYER MARRAKESH – A WORKING VISIT

By Tanya Upton



The Marrakech weather is a little wetter than Tanya expected...

In March 2019, I had the unmissable opportunity to be part of a trip to Marrakesh in Morocco as part of REEP's project with Le Foyer de Jeune Filles. Run by Soroptimist International, Le Foyer gives girls from rural areas a chance to continue their education by staying at this wonderful place and studying at the local schools and universities.

I am a volunteer gardener at Castle Bromwich Hall, where the 2016 REEP McLaren scholars had spent a few days helping transform the centre of our Holly Maze into an Anglo-Moroccan-Spanish inspired planting design. This time I would be working alongside Rob, a gardener from the National Trust's Blickling Estate in Norfolk, Nezha, a Moroccan university student from Essaouira, Abdel, a landscape architect from Rabat in Morocco and Becky, REEP's intern from Norwich. Nezha, Rob and Becky had all been involved in previous REEP projects. It was great to meet them, especially Nezha who says how much she loves the rain (while the rest of us probably preferred the Moroccan sun)!

From left: Tanya, Rob, Nezha, Abdel and Becky



DAY ONE

Clockwise from top left: Bahia Palace, Saadien Tombs, El Badi Palace



We had the opportunity to visit a few gardens with Rhiannon and Abdel. Whilst soaking in the atmosphere and getting my bearings we visited the Palais Badii, Palais de la Bahia and Tombeaux Saadiens. As well as admiring the beautiful tile work (known as zellige, geometric chiselled tiles), especially in Palais de la Bahia, it was interesting to see the many plants and trees that are grown, some familiar and some not so familiar to me. In both the gardens and streets of Marrakesh you cannot fail to see the many



A group of Moroccan gardeners weed the rose beds in the gardens of Avenue Mohammed VI

citrus trees shaped neatly into dome and drum-like shapes. Walking down the street in the morning we observed a large group of gardeners weeding around the roses and clipping the citrus trees. Morocco is so hot you can see why they would start work early in the day when the temperature is much more manageable.

Back in the Palais de la Bahia, the interior courtyard garden is divided into the traditional Islamic quadrant design, each section representing the four rivers of Paradise, and is further divided into quarters by raised paths. Date palms (*Phoenix dactylifera*) towered above the lower canopies of the Citrus, Jacaranda and Fig and further below could be seen Rosemary, Pelargonium (huge by our British standards), Jasmine, Bougainvillea and Papyrus. In the centre a water basin provides irrigation to the sunken beds. Here I was taken by the carefully sculpted irrigation channels which curved around and between the base of each



Decorative tiles, four square layout and traditional irrigation channels are all features of the Bahia Palace

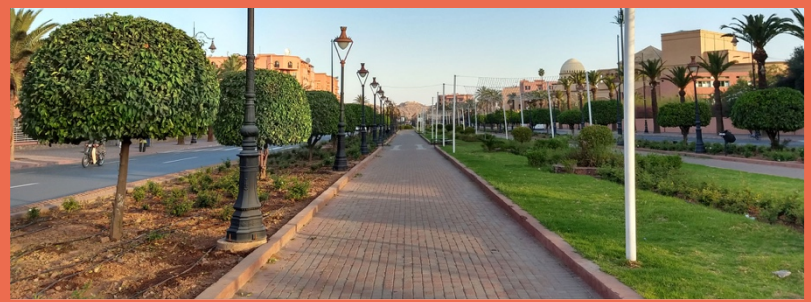
plant to take water to where it needs to be most in the hard, dry earth.

After a quick break for 'nuss-nuss' coffee ('half-half': half milk, half espresso) coffee, Rob arrived at the airport and we were introduced and went for lunch.

For the first few days we were lucky to have the company of Abdel who kindly drove us around and helped with communication whilst we went to purchase supplies for the gardening project. Our first visit to Le Foyer took us along the long Boulevard Mohammed VI which is completely lined with beds of roses, citrus trees and many other plants as well as various water fountains and goes through the centre of the Oliveraie, a massive olive garden/farm. The route then takes us through the middle of the Agdal, the vast and important productive pleasure garden created over 800 years ago planted with olives, citrus, figs, walnuts, pomegranates and almonds. Although it's not generally open to visit, I saw a glimpse of the rows of olive trees and raised walls through the fence alongside the road.



The gardens of Avenue Mohammed VI



At Le Foyer we were introduced to Miriam, the director, and had a look at the garden areas we would be working in. The construction followed a similar vein to the gardens I had already visited, with paved paths and sunken beds alongside and in between the slabs. The entrance area had simple quadrant beds with an orange tree in each bed under-planted with a few smaller plants and a small central basin. Going round the side of the characteristic pinky-coloured building, the wide path was lined by deep beds containing orange, pear



Tanya meets the director and has a tour of Le Foyer





This recreational area was developed during the REEP McLaren Scholarship in November 2018

and olive trees. The main courtyard area where work had started in November was looking great; a few weeds were evident but this would provide us with our first interactions with girls to get them cleared.

But our main focus was to be further around by the entrance to the kitchen. The area comprised a row of olive trees in a narrow section leading to a large dusty and weed covered area with a line of four palm trees alongside a large unfinished concrete base which seemed to be a sunbathing spot for some feral dogs (and their deposits were also in evidence!). To make a vegetable garden in this unpromising area seemed challenging, but looking at the hard, dusty earth we discussed and decided that raised beds filled with compost would be the way forward. We also needed to create a nursery area to start seeds off in, and there seemed to be some nice space between the olive trees that might be usable. We returned to the hotel, and discussed our plans and

Site for the vegetable garden and adjacent nursery area



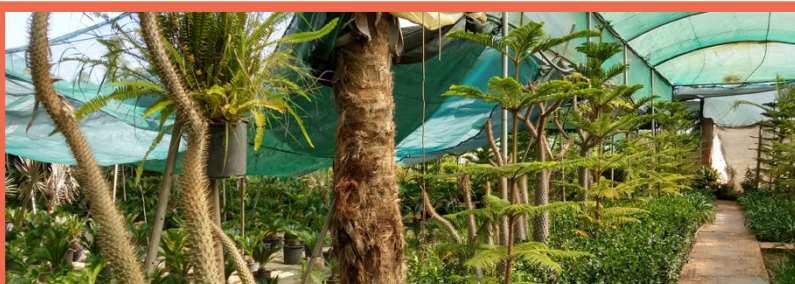
ideas. What we would need to buy and what would be achievable in the time we had? That evening Nezha arrived and we headed to dinner in the Kasbah area, where the restaurant ceiling was constructed of palm tree trunks - something different.

DAY TWO

Shopping day! Abdel drove us all to Mr Bricolage, which is a bit like B & Q but more colourful with painted artwork above the shelves. We had a look around and purchased some trowels and a hose-pipe, but decided against the seeds as the selection was small and we thought there might be a bigger choice elsewhere (which it turns out there wasn't so Rhiannon returned to get some another day). We then headed down the road towards Ourika, the main growing area for

Marrakesh due to its cooler location at the foothills of the Atlas Mountains. The road was lined with dozens of plant nurseries all stuffed full of cacti, agave, palms and other exotic looking plants that contrast with our generally 'softer' looking plant nurseries! There were also some thoughtfully displayed lines of marigolds, petunia and osteospermum, which added a splash of colour against the generally green and prickly offering. We were in search of seeds, compost and pots, which at home are easy to source, but

here seemed much trickier. After some toing and froing and long conversations between Abdel and the nursery staff, we eventually purchased 2 bags of compost but no pots and no seed. Due to this, and perhaps for the better, we decided we could make newspaper pots for seed sowing instead which would be cheaper and more environmentally sound.



Plant nurseries in the Ourika valley near Marrakech



Abdel negotiates a good price for 2 bags of compost





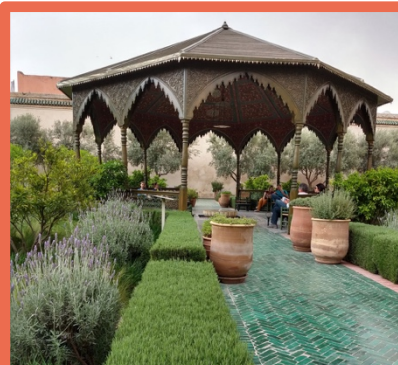
Sourcing wood from the local souks in Marrakech



Next we went in search of materials to create a shaded propagation area, and drove out to the north side of the Medina (old town) to the souk (market) for local people (as opposed to the areas geared towards tourists selling giftware). This was an amazing place, with workshops selling and making virtually anything you could ever want or need. Busy streets were full of motorbikes being welded back together, production lines of wardrobes being made, metal workers and

stacks of wood products which we went in to have a look at. We ended up with a massive split bamboo panel and some eucalyptus poles to make a shelter. We were able to arrange for them to be delivered to Le Foyer the following day for a small delivery fee after choosing the exact pieces we wanted.

After this fascinating morning of sourcing materials, we said goodbye to Abdel as he returned to Rabat, had lunch and then headed to *Le Jardin Secret*, designed by English landscape architect Tom Stuart Smith in an ancient site in the heart of the Medina. As the storm clouds gathered the sound of the palm leaves clapping in the wind and the swifts and swallows wheeling overhead made an electric atmosphere in the garden. I enjoyed looking around all of the varied plants in the Exotic Garden, before heading



The beautiful Islamic Garden at Le Jardin Secret



through the 'bent entrance' (so you cannot see one garden area to the next) to the Islamic Garden which is bigger and more structured but with fewer types of plant. The clipped hedges of rosemary contrasted beautifully with the soft wavy *Stipa tenuissima* inside them and the gorgeous green tiles of the paths. As the rain started, we headed back to the hotel to rest and reflect on the day.

DAY THREE

Monday and it was time to get started properly at Le Foyer. While we awaited the delivery of wood (which arrived on the back of a dinky Suzuki pickup) we started weeding the area around the olive trees where the shelter was to be built. The ground was dry, solid and stony so not the easiest to weed and I wondered how anything managed to grow in it at all! With a mix of raking and shovelling the tops of the weeds off we cleared the area, disturbing a gecko in the process who shimmied up the wall out of harms way. After an amazing lunch provided by the cooks at Le Foyer, Rob started work on the shelter and Nezha and I started weeding around the courtyard area. After a time, a few girls joined us followed by a gradually increasing crowd. It was nice to meet the girls, and we had a productive afternoon getting the couch grass out and showing them how to trim back the dead leaves of the banana plants. After a bit we



Work begins on the area for the nursery shelter



Clockwise from top: Nezha and the girls weeding in the courtyard; Rob is proud of his finished shelter; Tanya and Nezha show the girls pictures of English gardens



went into the shade and I showed a crowd of 30 or more girls some photos of Castle Bromwich Hall Gardens and told them a little bit about the gardens. They seemed to enjoy seeing the pictures, and asked questions about some of the plants. Suddenly a large number of girls disappeared, I presume it was lesson time, but over the week we got used to the ebb and flow as the girls joined us and then went away for lessons. By this point, Rob had already finished the shelter so we went around to admire his handy work. All we needed now was a table or two to raise the plants off the ground and out of the reach of the dogs.

DAY FOUR

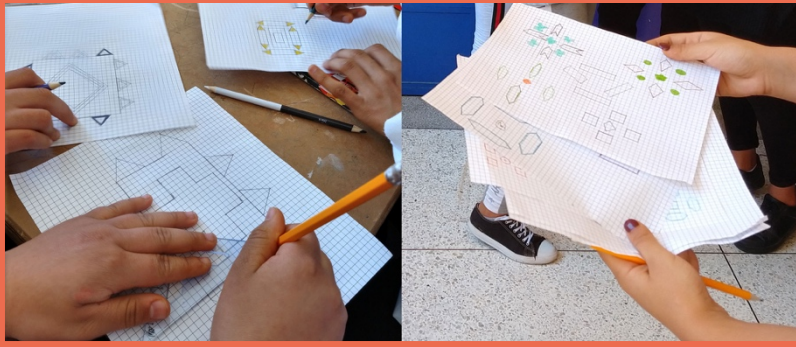


The following day we did a bit more weeding, and Nezha taught me the Arabic words for tree, plant, flower, bird and a few others which I think I can still remember! When there were a good number of girls free from lessons, we started to show them how to make paper pots from sheets of newspaper. We got a supply of old papers from a local shop, and a few coke cans to wrap the paper around. After showing the girls

how it was done, we had a good production line going and soon had a large pile of the little paper pots ready for seeds. Spontaneously the girls started singing, and continued as they made the pots, which was such a treat to hear! At lunch, Becky arrived from the airport and we all enjoyed another fantastic lunch.



The girls design raised beds for the vegetable garden



We had measured the site to create a plan for the raised beds, but thought it would be a nice idea to get the girls involved in designing the beds, maybe getting some ideas to create the beds in a more interesting pattern than just standard squares. We let them loose with the coloured pencils and paper, suggesting that there was so much inspiration to be had from the geometric patterns seen everywhere in the beautiful tile work. They came up with some great designs, some maybe more practical to build

than others! The designs were collected together so a winner could be decided on later on.

The evening was a mini adventure as we visited the main square, Jemaa el-Fnaa, and the colourful and busy souk. This area was the full Marrakesh experience, with food stalls and people trying to sell you everything as you walked along. Once in the souk, it is easy to get lost as the narrow streets wind and shops repeat the products they sell so it is hard to get your bearings. Getting lost was an interesting experience, but after some men tried to send us in the wrong direction (who knows where we would have ended up) it was a relief when we emerged back in the square and knew where we were!



Jemaa el-Fnaa is a feast for the senses

DAY FIVE

Back in Le Foyer the next morning, we played a photography game with the girls where they split into teams and had a theme shouted out which they had to photograph, the best photo being picked as the winner before the next theme was announced. There were some really creative results, and the girls enjoyed using the



The girls sow vegetable seeds in their paper pots

cameras we had brought in. Afterwards we started sowing the seeds, putting the compost in the paper pots and then a few seeds in each. We got the girls to write the name of the plant in Arabic and English, their name and the date on wooden sticks so they would know who had sown what and when. The seeds we had sourced were radish, carrot, aubergine, mustard and some haricot beans. We put the pots in the plastic tray we had managed to buy from a local shop, and would get a few more the following day as we had ordered them especially from the vendor. We then showed the girls how to water from the bottom until the paper was saturated but without the pots sitting in too much water. The trays could then be arranged on the tables we had put under the shelter in the shade out of the intense sunlight. We also did some shadow drawings and some more weeding with the girls, spotting worms, snails and ants in the process. In the hope of starting a gardening club, we got the girls to come up with some designs for a



The girls create beautiful art from plant shadows

logo for the club, to be used on t-shirts or caps. I think it was important to get the girls involved in these design ideas, to help give them some ownership and hopefully commitment to the project where they can continue with the gardening when the groups from REEP aren't there.

DAY SIX



The girls are pleased with their seed sowing activity

Our last day at Le Foyer was the busiest yet, with more girls seeming to be around than on the other days. We did some more seed sowing and had to resume pot making as we ran out. We looked through some of the books and magazines we had donated to their library, learning which plants were familiar and which weren't and teaching each other the English, French and Arabic names for them. The camera was let loose, with lots of photos being taken of everyone until the battery ran out! We went through some of the activity sheets for *Learning English Through Gardening*, where pictures had to be matched with words.

Becky teaches English Through Gardening



The girls enjoy new gardening books



As it was our last day at Le Foyer, we were surprised by an impromptu musical performance by some of the girls and there were lots of tears and kissing on the cheek. I hope we have set the girls up with lots of inspiration and motivation to continue and develop their gardening club, and look forward to seeing the work the next team do in May.



It's hard to say goodbye but the girls and the gardeners have wonderful memories to cherish

