



REEP

Religions & Environment
Education Projects

Gardening at Le Foyer in Marrakech

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When approached in the summer of 2018 of the very exciting, slightly daunting but amazing opportunity to go to Morocco to work with a charity called REEP I was filled with loads of emotions. I remembered mostly feeling how honoured and lucky I was to have the opportunity to experience a different culture whilst being asked to share my passion for horticulture and knowledge in a new way.

Later in the summer it became clear that REEP had been in negotiations with a girl's boarding house in Marrakech called Le Foyer de Jeune Filles. From these visits a brief was sent to us explaining 3 main points:

'To create a vegetable/herb garden in the grounds of the Foyer, adjacent to the library

To inaugurate a Gardening Club in the Foyer to maintain and develop the area, enjoy related activities and to teach English through gardening using activities from REEP's English Through Gardening resource, and through informal discussions with girls who show an interest in the project

To create a long-term strategy for maintenance and growth, including further input from the REEP garden team '

On our first day in Morocco, Marrakech we visited Le Foyer and we were met by a few of the girls and the head teacher. It was so great to chat and even play garden games with the girls, they were so incredibly warm and friendly as we had been friends for years. This session helped us gain an understanding of what they might want from the vegetable garden and how they currently use the space, all helping us think of ideas and a plan for the future of this space.

During this visit we all met an inspiring Lady who is known by the nickname of Madame Bean-Bean and who had us all in silence within seconds with her heartfelt and inspiring story of how the boarding house came about. She explained of her "dream" to help girls in rural areas to have a place to stay during the school week in order to receive education. I

will never forget us all listening to her every word as she explained the situation that in rural areas if schools are too full then the girls would be the first to dip out of an education for a domestic life, or sometimes crime. We all left with a deeper connection to the place and why REEP had chosen this as a project. I feel confident to say when I speak on behalf of the group that we all left wanting to do right by the girls and to create a green space that would be used and looked after for future generations.

The following days, REEP had kindly organised trips to visit some amazing Islamic gardens in and around Marrakech to help us find inspiration. One of my most favourite days was spent visiting Ourika Valley, an area where many of the girls from the boarding house lived. Here we visited two great gardens - one where they harvested Crocus for saffron and then onto a small botanical garden where most of the plants were used in aromatherapy. These gardens truly illustrated the range of flora that Morocco can grow.

Later on that day we were invited by our driver to visit a nearby waterfall, the drive there was further up into the Atlas Mountains, this drive felt to me more like a white-knuckle ride which the group and the driver found rather funny. The driver loved to scare me even further on purpose, which was funny but still scary. The drama continued as the little stroll up to the waterfall turned into an expedition up a mountain side climbing massive boulders, and I was also dressed in ridiculous flipflops and sliding all over the place and was rather a silly sight to passers-by and our guide. That all being said it was truly such a great day with lots of laughs and one I will remember.

During these visits the project for the girls back at the boarding house was still very much in my thoughts. After a few group sessions we created a list of ideas and workshops for the proposed spot. Our main challenge ahead was to decide if we should create raised beds or if we should smash up parts of the hard surface, as the site presented to us had no soil apart from one large sunken bed and 10 citrus trees growing out of 1m square beds.

After these brainstorming sessions I decided to draw up a plan to present to the team in the morning to make sure we had included all the exciting ideas, they all seemed very happy. From this plan we then agreed on what could be implemented from the design on this visit, which included the following:

Create a painted path, Prune the citrus trees, raise the soil in a long border and plant up to create a sense of enclosure, build two raised beds as a prototype to see if the raised bed option was better than smashing up parts of concrete. During all of these projects we agreed to have horticultural workshops where the girls could be part of, covering pruning, planting, weeding and bed preparation, whilst teaching English to all different levels either very basic such as the colours we were painting on the floor to create a path, or talking in conversation for those with more advanced English.

Some of my best days were spent teaching the girls weeding, planting, and how to nurture the garden so when we have gone they can tend for its every need. The thing that struck me most is how pretty much all the girls wanted to get involved with the project, all willing to lend a hand no matter how unexciting or repetitive the tasks. Tasks from lifting, shifting and carrying to others that once shown would be carried out with the finest detail and care.

Away from gardening we also played many classic garden games, which to be honest highlighted our British eccentricity especially when I tried to explain the rules of the egg and spoon race, this seemed very popular along with badge making and twister. To make sure all the 150 girls had a chance at all the activities, we insisted on a queuing system which the girls thought was funny, and that was commented on how English that was and this became a running joke through the week.

The week ended at Le Foyer with an opening ceremony of the garden where the girls used flowers to decorate a dead tree and we all ran a small workshop to keep the girls entertained. My workshop was for the girls to write on paper bunting flags what they wish for or liked to, and then decorate the trees. Later into the evening the party really kicked in with a live DJ playing Islamic pop music and the girls went crazy with their truly amazing dancing skills. I of course tried to look cool, young and hip and join in but I definitely looked like Mr Bean in a night club, which I was being secretly nicknamed by a few girls which is hilarious to be honest.

After our night which felt like clubbing at the boarding house with the girls, the team was invited to dine at a restaurant with the REEP crew. It dawned on me there that this was kind of our last supper together, the end of climbing mountains sides in flipflops or painting floors in bright colours. I will never forget this life experience with REEP, the girls, and to

be honest all the people I met along the way in Morocco, and I truly hope I will go back with the REEP team for years to come.

