Report to Stanley Smith (UK) Horticultural Trust

Chelsea Physic Garden Xerophytic Garden Project

April 2025

Summary

In 2024, Chelsea Physic Garden drew up plans for a xerophytic garden, in a newly vacant plot adjacent to the Glasshouses, which previously housed a range of cold frames. The Stanley Smith (UK) Horticultural Trust kindly awarded the Garden a grant of £3,000 to fund the landscaping and purchasing of plants.

The project was slightly delayed due to a change in staffing at the Garden but was completed in March 2025. The garden will now develop and mature, with regular reviews conducted to assess plant health and climate resilience.

Project Background

Chelsea Physic Garden completed the restoration of its historic glasshouses in 2023. In addition to the relocation and refinement of some of the glasshouse collections and a range of cold frames, the project supported the creation of a Living Collections Conservation Plan for the Garden. This Plan reviewed what is grown at the Garden, and why, against key criteria.

The Plan highlighted some gaps in the Garden's collection, including taxa from the desert and plains regions of North America, which are popular in the xeriscape dry garden movement. The Garden's Horticultural Team determined that this was a priority development area for two reasons: the Garden has a commitment to reducing water usage in line with its sustainability goals; and, the Garden is known for being able to grow plants outdoors, that would otherwise typically be found under glass, due to its unique microclimate.

The relocation of the Garden's cold frames left a vacant bed adjacent to the Pit House, the ideal location for a xerophytic garden, filling the physical and taxonomic gap within the Garden's collection.

The project will also be used as a test to see whether this type of planting can be part of a longer-term sustainable solution across other areas of the Garden, for other xerophytic or drought tolerant taxa.

Project Progress

In Spring 2024, the Garden's Propagation Manager began growing hundreds of plants from cuttings and seeds, as many of the taxa from the desert and plains regions are notoriously slow growing (some have yet to germinate, and more

are being prepared to sow later in the season). The arrival of a new Head of Plant Collections, Emily Hazell, in August 2024 led to the project starting in earnest. The Glasshouse Manager, John Constable, was given the responsibility of project lead. John started as a Trainee at the Garden in 2021 and has worked his way up to Glasshouse Manager. This project has provided a great opportunity for him to develop new skills and expertise, whilst creating a significant new collection for the Garden.

The groundwork (pictured below) was completed in November 2024, with the boulders and rocks being delivered in late October. Thanks to the grant from the Stanley Smith (UK) Horticultural Trust, 115 plants were purchased, including seven larger plants such as Yucca linearifolia, Agave parryi, and Nolina nelsonii.

Left: groundwork; Centre: planning the planting; Right: boulder and rock delivery

These larger plants were bedded out in February, followed by some of the propagated and purchased plants, and a layer of gravel. The landscaping and planting were supported by two interns from the Future Gardeners scheme, and some early-career horticultural volunteers, supporting the training of the next generation of horticulturalists.

There was some variation from the original plant list, following a review by the Head of Plant Collections and the advice of the Trust. We have sowed a variety of flowering plants such as Thelesperma filifolium, Eschscholzia californica, and Cleomella lutea. Some are still in the Propagation House, until they are deemed hardy enough to survive outdoors and the weather becomes more favourable.

It became apparent that there were enough materials to extend the bed to a small adjacent plot, which is under the canopy of the cork oak tree. The Horticultural Team decided that this bed would work well for mediterranean

xerophytic plants, typically found growing in dry and shady evergreen mediterranean woodland.

In total, 13 new unique taxa were added to Chelsea Physic Garden's collection, which have never been grown at the Garden before. A selection of others have been grown in the past, many of which were previously under glass.

The beds will continue to mature over the next two to three years, but a good annual display is anticipated for mid-later summer 2025. New interpretation panels will soon be installed, so that visitors can learn more about xerophytic plants, and why they are being grown at the Garden.

Left: Xerophytic Bed; Right: MedXero

The xerophytic garden has had a positive impact on the ecology of the Garden. The warm, sandy exposed areas are providing vital habitats for ground nesting bees, hoverflies, and other insects. A wonderful and unexpected outcome!

Chelsea Physic Garden remains grateful to the Stanley Smith (UK) Horticultural Trust for its support of the Xerophytic Garden, as well as past projects and programmes. For further information or any queries, please contact:

Jen Dyer, Fundraising Manager