

Outside space



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Anything but barren

David Hoppit meets the desert plants expert known as Mr Cactus

Most people through the ages, even Isaiah in the Bible, have dismissed deserts as inhospitable areas of desolation, of no use to mankind. Frenchman Joël Lodé would beg to differ; he has spent his life cycling through such spaces and is now a leading advocate for the plants and creatures that can survive and, indeed, thrive in them.

Lodé, 55, grew up in Nantes, birthplace of *Around the World in 80 Days* author Jules Verne, and was greatly inspired by the writer. Captivated by wildlife, he spent his boyhood studying nature and collecting fossils, some of which are still displayed in his local museum. But it was a trip with his father to the Sahara that sparked his lifetime obsession with desert flora.

As soon as he was old enough to leave home, he decided to start exploring the world's arid places on his ancient bicycle. But there was one thorny problem: the spiky cactus kept puncturing his tyres.

"I hated them. On one day, I had 19 punctures and I couldn't understand why

God had allowed them to exist," he says. But "then, gradually, I grew to admire them – their tenacity and their ability to survive in the harshest of environments."

There are about 3,500 species of cacti, ranging in size from small cushions of rosette leaves to giant tree-like monsters, but almost all have prickles as a defence against the sun and animals. They are also able to capture and store moisture, sometimes within their roots but more often in barrel-shaped stems, some of which have pleat-like ribs to allow expansion and contraction. Many flower for only a few hours; those pollinated by birds during the day tend to have red or yellow blooms with no scent while those pollinated by moths and bats at night give off a heady aroma. Varieties are virtually maintenance free and some are now being studied for the health benefits.

Today Lodé is recognised as one of the most knowledgeable men on cacti in the world. His lectures and journals are much prized by botanists and, now that his cycling days are behind him, he's in great demand as a park and private gar-

den designer, especially in Spain and the Canary Islands.

Seven years ago he visited some run-down and abandoned citrus nurseries in Andalucía, south-eastern Spain, intending to stay for three or four months to advise developers on landscaping a new golf course development named Desert Springs. He ended up buying a house in nearby Cuevas del Almanzora, close to



the desert area so beloved of the makers of cowboy and Indian films, and now spends his days in a rambling nursery, nurturing several thousand cacti and succulents, some miniscule, some towering, many with exquisite flowers.

As Thomas Gray wrote: "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen; and waste its sweetness on the desert air." But thanks to Lodé's work at Desert Springs – the name of which comes from four water sources that bubble from its otherwise parched acres – these varieties blush in full view of a growing population. This is Spanish scenery as it used to be, before bulldozers, investors and English pubs polluted other *costas*.

The climate is scorching and unforgiving but careful cultivation and planting, combined with irrigation systems, desalination plants and dams have created a 570-acre oasis.

The list of flora and fauna incorporated runs to 16 closely-typed pages and includes two plants that Lodé named after his daughters, *Chamaelobivia* "Alexandrine", with large red flowers, and *Apte-*

nia Cordifolia "Karine", with lovely yellow blooms. The landscape so impressed judges in the recent New Homes Garden Awards that they gave it a gold medal, describing it as an imaginative landscape, a delight for residents and of enormous value to the environment.

Lodé has also designed some individual villa gardens with plants, pebbles and automatic irrigation at a cost of about £10,000 each. And he's working on two other projects – a 12-acre botanical garden close to Tabernas and landscaping for a hotel in Tenerife – as well as a book about his life and adventures – including nearly 30,000 miles of desert cycling – to be published in four languages.

The man known as Mr Cactus seems content. But as he talks one senses his mind is far away, in some parched and rocky place, pedalling his bicycle and seeking more new species. Has he really hung up his cycle clips for good?

"I have been so busy and there is so much work to do here, I can't really see me starting my travels again," he says. But his tone is rather wistful.

Growing global

One to see now
Crathes Castle, near Aberdeen, Scotland

What for?

Topiary and hedging come into their own in the depths of winter, adding structure and interest. Crathes Castle has fine examples of ancient yew hedging and traditional topiary. Admire the morning frost on the sculpted shapes and then warm up inside the castle with a tour.



One to have
Topiary in a pot

Why?

The perfect present for a smaller property. Box, yew or Japanese holly are the usual choices. For an economical and fast-growing alternative, go for ivy grown on a frame of wire mesh.



Diane Summers