

## HOUSE &amp; HOME

## OUTSIDE SPACE

## Something's brewing in Cornwall

An English country estate is cultivating the UK's first commercial crop of tea bushes, writes Sarah Murray

It is an outlier in the grounds of Tregillasson, an medieval estate in Cornwall, southwest England, garden director Jonathan James points to a wooden tea table glass table. This ornamental structure, for a glass table in a wooden case, is a masterpiece designed in 1881 by Victorian landscape artist John Ruskin. It was built to protect exotic plants on their journey from around the world. "We have this little thing and I look at it every so often," he says, "because it has been a real test, it's a real test and we've brought back to the UK in it."

It's fitting that Tregillasson should have such an item. For centuries the estate has collected and cultivated botanical specimens. As a result, its garden has everything from magnolias to a collection of more than 1,000 varieties of orchids. And like the estate's listed objects – tea bushes – are perhaps not as readily identifiable as the flowers they are so much more so.

Although tea is known as the great British beverage, the leaves have historically come from countries such as China, India, Sri Lanka and Kenya. Tregillasson's tea is in fact the first to be cultivated in the UK and its plants are now selling at specialist retailer Farnham & Sons and being served at London's most such as Claridge's and the Connaught at Kensington Palace.

The estate's owner, the Marquess of Ely, has been – appropriately enough a descendant of Karl Marx – working James with the idea for the tea garden. "Jonathan realized early on that there was potential in producing a higher than product that might have a slightly value," he says.

But he expects the newly designed house of tea on the way to the future of his family home. However's success had inspired this modern house of tea had in the early 18th century. From listed from Cornwall, England means "the house of the head of the valley" and, more exactly, the 17th-century house house – which was enlarged and improved in the 18th – commands a splendid view over the surrounding valley towards the River Fal.

But it is the grounds, the UK's largest garden botanical garden, that are James's real source of pride. What founded in 1881 by John Pender is now back through England as a 10th



It was the inspiration of Tregillasson represents the first step in a different approach to estate management

day

estate, the 18th-century garden and other estate is a garden landscape in which visitors such as a 200-year old oak tree and some of the world's largest magnolia trees (planted in 1881) are great walks ways shared by natural forms.

The practice of botanical collecting goes back a long way at Tregillasson. It

is thought that when the marquis was introduced to the garden in the 18th century, they were the first to be grown in the UK. That collection was James – Tregillasson's son 20 years old – and a new William plant, or glass table, an ancient species dating back to the Jurassic period, are other highlights.

Maintaining such an estate is a really tough job, says James. Traditionally, like many great country estates, Tregillasson has been run from a nearby village based in local farmers. But, with marquis's family business finding it hard to survive, this model was under considerable strain. However's goal was to create a

new by opening the estate to the public but he wants to maintain it as a private residence, with visitors admitted to the garden by appointment only.

The idea was to make the Tregillasson tea project the flagship for a whole range of garden and outdoor products, including recycling from old things and bringing of flowers to garden furniture, honey, essential oils, lavender and more.

It was the marquis that inspired the new idea. "English" tea, since the tea plant actually comes from a variety of countries around the world, James says, "is a blend of many different plants from China... as this is the thinking that really tea is not impossible," says James, who worked with a relationship from the World Foundation, which most of the world's tea-growing regions before embarking on the project.

What allows both the marquis and the tea bushes to thrive is Tregillasson's rich, acidic soil in the weather. In fact,

conditions in this part of Cornwall are not so different to those in Darjeeling in the Himalayas foothills, the source of some of the world's best tea. A soil, says James, that is rich in potassium and, especially for tea cultivation, even drains very slowly.

But, while Tregillasson's tea bushes are currently grown in the natural British garden, however's also working to develop an "international tea center" nearby. As a computer generated image on one wall of the estate office shows, the concept would grow the more than the average soil for tea, providing insights and only into the process of growing and blending tea but also into the history of drinking and trading it. The center would benefit from its proximity to the Eden Project, where visitors and environmental displays are already an important tourist attraction.

"Having the visitor center located here is an good because this is a great site garden and it's not accessible by road," says James. (Tregillasson's drive way is indeed four miles long.) The idea is to build some other place in Cornwall and the day a much larger tea garden with a couple of hundred acres and a full-blown factory.

This is all a long way off and so the industry "new line", James and however acknowledge that they are still learning. Early on in the venture, for example, a severe gale spoiled all the first tea bushes in the British garden and those that grew on the other side of a high rail track wall. (Coincidentally, they all were from England.) But now James has been surprised at how quickly the tea plants have taken to English soil. "You can almost imagine you can see them growing," he says. "It's unbelievable – the speed of which they call the 'teaing cycle', which refers to the time between each plant. There are now plans to upgrade the greenhouse and produce tea and other products for James and Karl Marx tea tea."

He makes her feel the tea garden project is just a small part of a bigger plan – creating a viable economic future for the 20th-century house. "This tea is not delivering anything to the bottom line right now but it could give profit to all the other products," James says. "And it represents as much of what Tregillasson is trying to do. This is a private family house – and the tea center is a way of having a public face."

David Murray's book *Marquess's Paradise: The Jacobite Journeys of the Third Marquis* will be published in May by Simon & Schuster.

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