

HOUSE & 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 Tregilless, an medieval estate in Cornwall, southwest England, garden director Jonathan Jones points to a wooden tea table glass table. This ornamental structure, for a glass 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 of what we can do with it."

It's fitting that Tregilless 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. Tregilless's tea is in fact the first to be cultivated in the UK and its plants are now selling at specialist retailer Fuchsia & Stone 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 - visiting Jones with the idea for the tea garden. "Jonathan realized early on that there was potential in producing a high-end product that might have a real value," he says.

Now he expects the newly designed house of tea on the way to the future of his family home. However's success has inspired this weekend course of tea tea in the early 18th century. From India from Cornwall, England means "the house of the head of the valley" and, more recently, the 19th-century name 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 private botanical garden, that are Marquess's real source of pride. What founded in 1881 by John Phipps is now back through England as a 16th



It was his, the inspiration of Tregilless represents the first step in a different approach to estate management

century, the 16th-century garden and other rooms in a glorious 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 walking ways shaded by mature trees.

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

is thought that when the marquis was introduced to the garden in the 16th century, they were the first to be grown in the UK. Your botanical garden - Tregilless's are 18 years old - and a new 17th-century glass, or glassware tea, an ancient species dating back to the Jurassic period, are other highlights.

Maintaining such an asset is a really tough job, however. Traditionally, like many great country estates, Tregilless has been run from a family and the land is passed down. But, with marquis's family business finding it hard to survive, this model was under considerable strain. However could go on for ever

now 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 now is to make the Tregilless 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 tea. "English" tea, since the tea plant actually comes from a variety of countries around the world, has been grown in China, as this is the thinking that early tea is not impossible," says Jones, 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 Tregilless'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 cool, damp but mild climate provides just what is needed for tea cultivation, even from the north.

But, while Tregilless's tea bushes are currently grown in the natural British garden, Marquess also wants to establish a "commercial tea estate" nearby. As a computer-generated image on one wall of the estate office shows, the concept seems to be more than the average visit for visitors, providing insights and only into the process of growing and blending tea but also into the history of drinking and looking it. The estate would benefit from the proximity to the Eden Project, where visitors and one typical day are clearly an important local attraction.

"Having the visitor centre located here is an good because this is a great site garden and it's not accessible by road," says Jones. (Tregilless's site is only a few 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 "newbies", Jones and Marquess 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 Jones has been inspired to grow quickly for 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 food and tea tea 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 this 18th-century house. "This tea is not delivering anything to the bottom line right now but it could give profit to all the other products," Jones says. "And it represents as much of what Tregilless is trying to do. This is a private family house - and the tea estate is a way of having a public face."

David Murray's book *Marquess's Paradise: The Incredible Journeys of the Phipps We Did* will be published in May by Jacqui Press.

Growing global

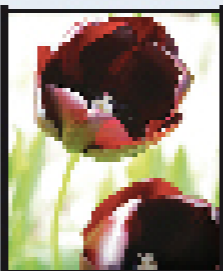
one to two more: Corked, Ireland

what for: Lying flat. The specialist spring seat is open until May 15 and is a success by the Victorian house built



one to two more: Tregilless, Cornwall

what for: To produce the spring display. This is a late-blooming bulb with the darkest maroon-like pink



compiled by Sarah Murray