

Thanet's Mediterranean plant legacy

Will Friend of East Northdown Farm Gardens celebrates Thanet's Mediterranean legacy in the plants brought to the isle by a succession of Romans in the 1st century, monks and pilgrims from Rome in the 7th century, and returning Crusaders from Spain and the Holy Land in the 11th to 13th centuries.

Today's Greek Cypriot, Turkish, Coptic and Italian communities are only the latest in a long history of people from the Mediterranean to settle here in Thanet. Claudius' Roman legionaries first came 2000 years ago, bringing their trees, vegetables, crops and herbs with them, as well as their culture, technology and latterly the Christian faith. Far from being a remote, bleak outpost of the empire, Thanet was a key crossroads at the centre of Western Europe's sea lanes and land routes.

Thanet's unique microclimate

Unlike any inland areas of France, Germany or Britain, Thanet has a uniquely favourable microclimate, suitable for growing plants from the Mediterranean.

Even before the Romans, Neolithic man brought over our key agricultural plants – wheat, barley, kale, peas and beans – all natives of what is now Iraq. Thanet's light soil over chalk was ideally suited to these crops, as clearance of the sparse tree cover and cultivation was relatively easy with only basic tools. Thanet, along with the chalk downs of Dorset and Wiltshire, showed evidence of the highest population densities in Western Europe in the late Neolithic and early Bronze Age periods.

A Mediterranean climate is characterised by a low summer rainfall and mild, wet winters that favour evergreen plants, which can withstand light frosts (down to -8°C). Thanet's rainfall is low due to its position on the eastern most corner of the country, and its minimum winter temperatures are kept up by the surrounding seas, which act like a massive storage heater during the winter, warming the cold easterly and northerly air streams from central Europe or the Baltic in Winter (and cooling them in Summer). Our native deciduous and herbaceous plants can withstand the winter minimum temperatures found inland and on continental Europe of down to -20°C, but they are not active during the winter and struggle during periods of summer drought, so do less well than some of the evergreen Mediterranean plants that have naturalised here. Most mountains in the Mediterranean area are limestone, a harder older form of chalk. This makes them best adapted to the twin effects of summer drought and chalky soils found here.

Alexanders, or *Smyrniololusum* (pic. a). A relative of celery and parsnip, and growing in Reading Street Road, this plant was introduced by the Romans as a winter green vegetable, which grows rapidly in late winter/early spring, but dies down to a large root in summer. A Roman villa lay at the southwest end of the street (which may be a Roman Road). Some exquisitely made coins and bronze artefacts, such as a foot off a small bronze tripod censor, have been found in recent years.

The Fig, or *Ficus Carica* (pic. b), was first brought over by the Romans, and even today plants still grow out of the walls of the Roman fort at Reculver. This variety, called 'Reculver', was then taken on to America, where it remains the main commercially cultivated variety in California today.

Bay, or *Laurus Nobilis* (pic. c). The bay tree - *laurus* in Latin and *daphne* in Greek - was also brought here by the Romans. It produces small round acorn-like fruit, with an aromatic black skin, attracting flocks of hungry birds in winter. They seed themselves around freely in many old Thanet gardens. Laurel wreaths were awarded as a badge of honour in classical times, giving rise to such terms as 'baccalaureate' and poet laureate.

Rosemary, or *Rosemarinus officialis* (pic. d). Aromatic Mediterranean shrubs were first introduced by the Romans for their medicinal properties (providing the plant's own defences against infection/browsing etc). Although many were probably lost in the Dark Ages, they would have been reintroduced into monastic physic gardens in the mediaeval period by returning pilgrims and Crusaders.



East Northdown Farm Gardens

William's family have lived and farmed in Thanet for countless generations. Family legend holds that their Sackett forbears derived their name from being Roman archer auxiliaries. (Saggitarii).

At their family home at East Northdown Farm, William and Louise have gathered a unique collection of plants from areas of the world with similar Mediterranean-type climates to Thanet. These are propagated for sale at their plant nursery and can be seen growing around the gardens and grounds, which are open daily. Plants may be selected from the vast range available in the nurseries, or prior enquires made by phone or email.

Guided tours are occasionally held for local charities in the summer, or by appointment for gardening groups.

Lectures can be arranged on a range of local history or gardening topics. The Nursery tearooms in Taddy's Barn are operated Monday to Saturday by The Looking Ahead Project, which provides training in employment and life skills for young adults with special educational needs.

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