

THE ART OF GARDENS, PLANTS AND FLOWERS

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FROM LITTLE ACORNS...

After renovating a Georgian house in east London, artist Pedro da Costa Felgueiras decided to take on his greatest restoration project yet – replanting a cork oak forest in Portugal. But can he wait 50 years for his first harvest?

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BY TRAINING AND INCLINATION, Pedro da Costa Felgueiras finds new life in dead wood, beauty in decay, hope in lost causes and inspiration in a disappearing past. But the artist and historical paint specialist – whose steady hands and expert eye have restored the lustre to such well-known buildings as Horace Walpole’s Gothic revival castle, Strawberry Hill, in Twickenham, and the winged dragons on nearby Kew Gardens’ Great Pagoda – is facing his greatest challenge yet: restoring a cork forest to the scorched plain that surrounds his Portuguese home.

He bought the estate, which lies halfway between Lisbon and the Algarve, with its ruined farmhouse, in 2018. There were just a few survivors left of what had once been a sea of mature cork oaks that had helped provide Europe’s wine trade with a steady supply of cork for generations. Even today, Portugal still produces around half the world’s cork, and the oak (*Quercus suber*) it comes from accounts for nearly a quarter of the country’s natural forest. Unfortunately, tax breaks introduced in the 1970s for the local paper industry drove this truly sustainable forestry into decline. One by one, the slow-growing ancient oaks began to be chopped down and replaced with fast-growing pine and eucalyptus. But now Felgueiras wants to reverse the trend and bring the cork oaks back.

It’s a long way from the picturesque pocket of a garden he’s created behind his lovingly restored Georgian townhouse in Whitechapel, east London – not just in terms of distance but also in size. ‘The estate in Portugal is about the size of Victoria Park,’ he says, searching for a local comparison for his 34 hectares in Portugal. The townhouse – which he saved from demolition when he bought it a decade ago, with no electricity or mains water supply – was once a surgeon’s quarters attached to the Royal London Hospital.

Born and brought up in Lisbon, he moved to London in the 1990s, and worked in bars and theatres to fund the antique finds he’d pick up at weekends at Portobello and Brick Lane markets. His love of salvage turned into a career after he studied conservation at the Sir John Cass School of Art. Now, after more than 20 years’ working in restoration in Britain, he plans to spend more time in Portugal after Brexit – and not simply because he prefers the political climate. He has thousands of trees to plant.

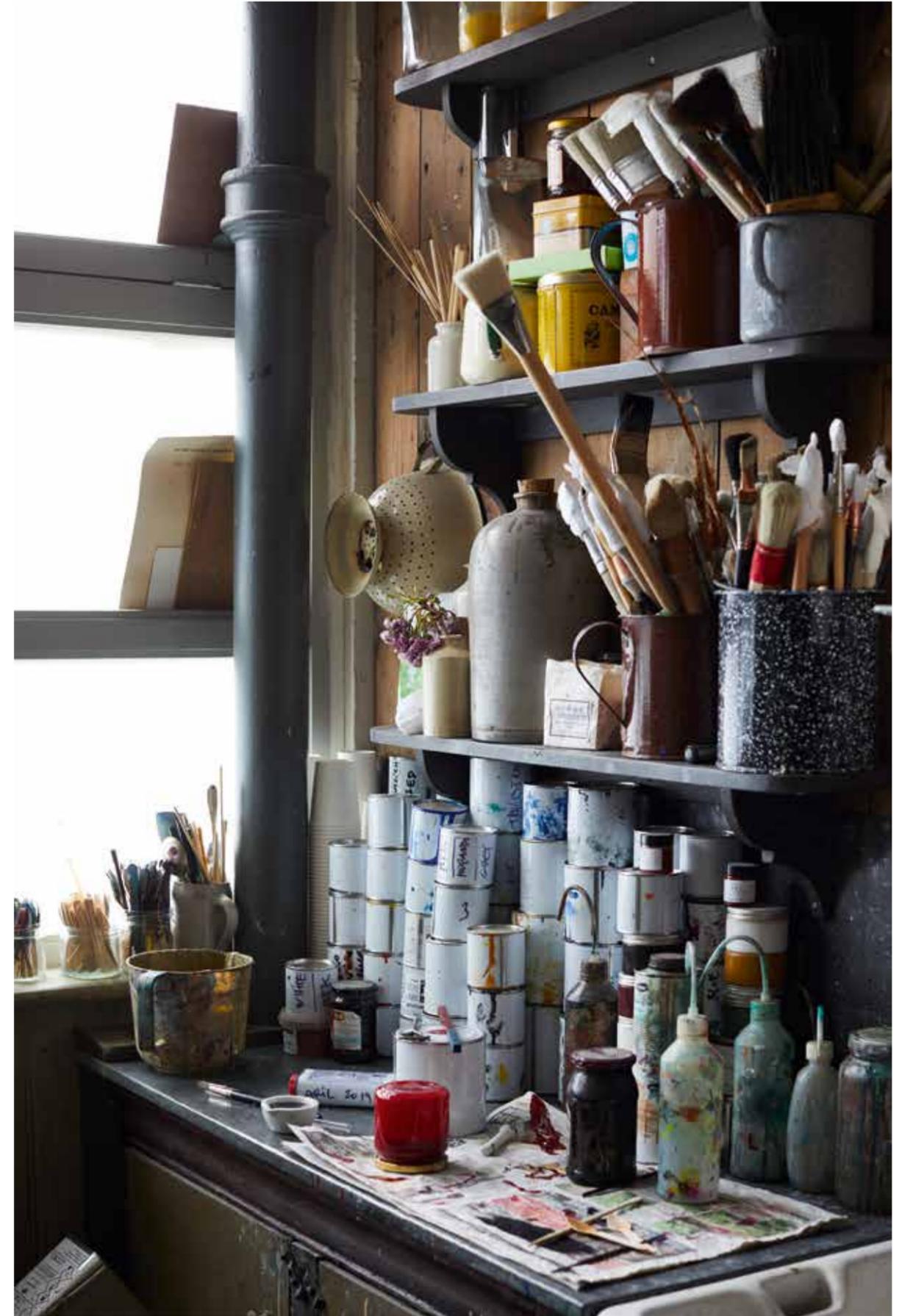
Not that he stands much chance of seeing his reforestation work bear fruit: it takes a cork oak half a century to reach the required maturity to offer up its bark regularly for harvest, which then only takes place roughly every 10 years. But such forbidding time frames won’t stop Felgueiras from planting his trees, knowing as he does, that the best cork – like all good things – comes to he who waits.

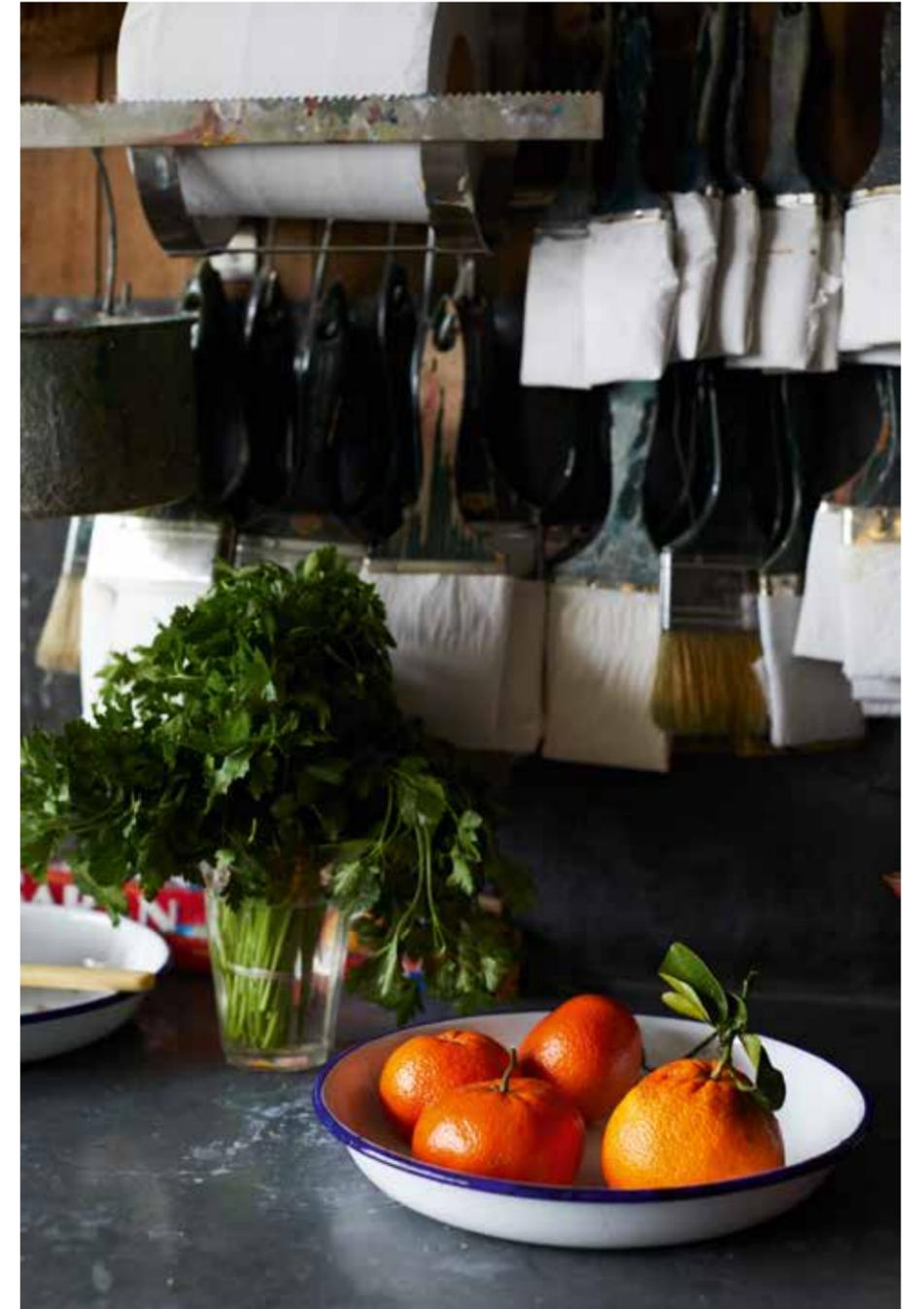
‘The best way to grow cork oaks is straight in the ground from an acorn,’ he says. ‘If you keep them in a pot for too long, the oak becomes root-bound and they don’t grow very fast.’ Felgueiras, though, is planting saplings on his estate, not out of impatience, but because reforestation on this scale is an expensive business and his new oaks are part-funded by the European Union, whose contractors arrive with lorry loads of young trees, rather than sacks of acorns, to plant. Even so, he says, ‘you have to wait half a century for the first decent harvest’. Before that age, each tree will give up a rough, raggedy cork beneath its young bark, that the Portuguese deem fit only for compressing with glue for floor tiles.

‘After 50 years, you start to get what, in Portugal, we call the “cork cork”,’ he says. ‘The dense cork that’s used to make corks for wine

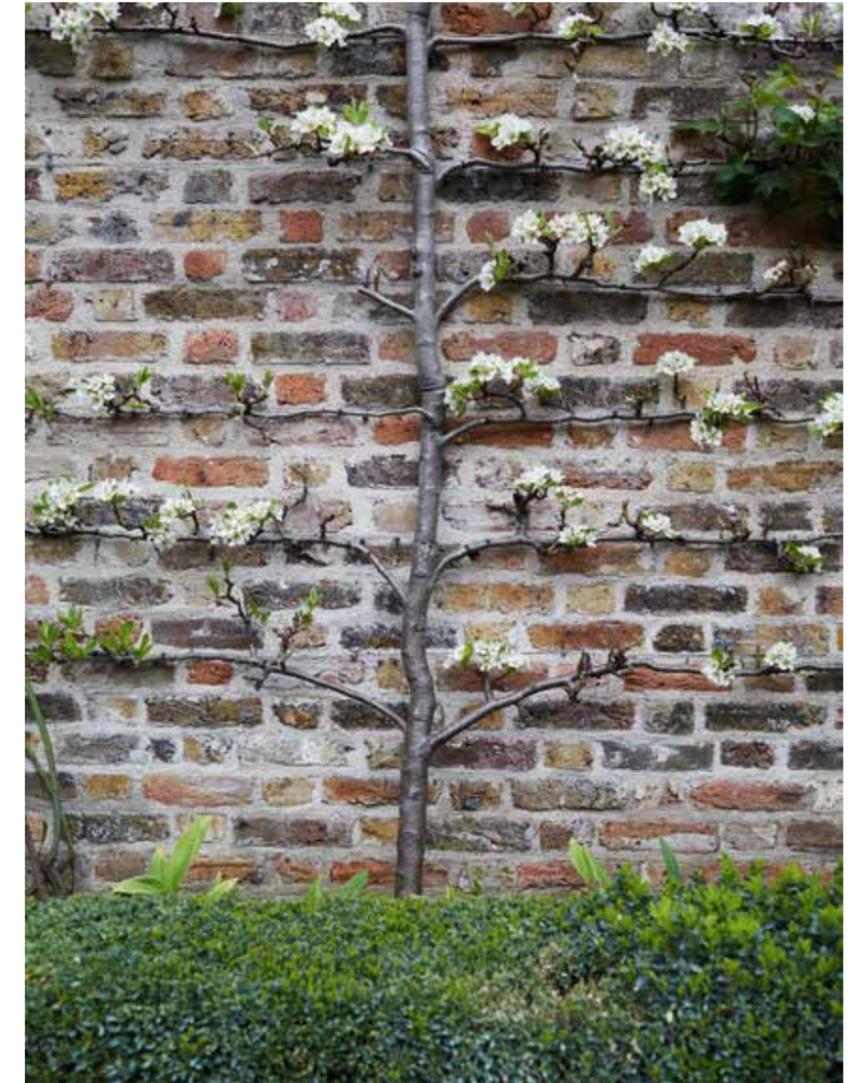


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bottles. I'm 50 now, so I'll be 100 when I get my first harvest.' But Felgueiras isn't downhearted, because he has fallen for the promise of cork – and the legacy he will leave – in a big way.

As a historical paint expert, he is used to mixing rare pigments to recreate colours used before the invention of synthetic paint. As an artist, he is known for his lacquer work. 'But 10 years ago, after my father died, I went to Portugal and I came across large pieces of cork for the first time, cut straight from the tree. They were such beautiful, organic shapes that I brought some back to my workshop in London. One day I was mixing paints for Strawberry Hill and I was running out of surfaces to try the paint on, so I painted some cork. My lacquer work is smooth and highly finished, whereas cork has an almost visceral, organic texture. But paint it and the results are stunning. It's what made me love it so much.'

Ever since, Felgueiras has been fashioning vessels out of gnarled, husks of cork, painting the insides exotic shades with his antique pigments – ecclesiastical purple, Oxford yellow, ultramarine blue – and finishing each piece with a rim of copper. 'They are just like big pieces of jewellery,' he says. And about as expensive. The vessels sell for £2,000 a piece. Not that money is the object of the exercise (Felgueiras' pieces routinely fetch thousands of pounds). 'It was much more about going back to my roots,' he says.

'The craftsmanship I had learnt in London and my Portuguese roots coming together in one piece.'

'I grew up in a very rural country,' Felgueiras says. 'We may have lived in an apartment in Queluz [a suburb of Lisbon], but my father had an allotment in front of one of Lisbon's most beautiful 18th-century palaces. It was my playground, where I climbed on the statues while my father tended his vegetables. We spent every weekend there. Whenever we visited my grandmother in the countryside, we'd stop at deserted villas on the way to forage or pick flowers. When we got to her house the door would be open, chickens and rabbits would be running around, and the neighbours would be dropping in fresh fruit and veg from the market. It was a rural life. It's where my love of nature comes from. But Portugal is also where my love of ancient objects comes from.'

Now Felgueiras will bring both to bear on his oaks – and he's fast learning the virtues of patience, and about investing in the future as well as venerating the past. 'I've heard of a nearby reforestation project that the EU is planning over 135 years. No-one is going to live that long, so I guess you need an incentive to persuade people to plant the trees. But I want to do it anyway, even if I won't see the results. I'll probably make someone, who hasn't been born yet, rich one day. But I'm happy to be living for someone else.' •