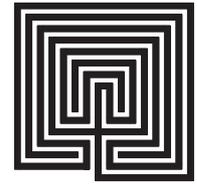


# Hedge Mazes in Portugal: A Brief History

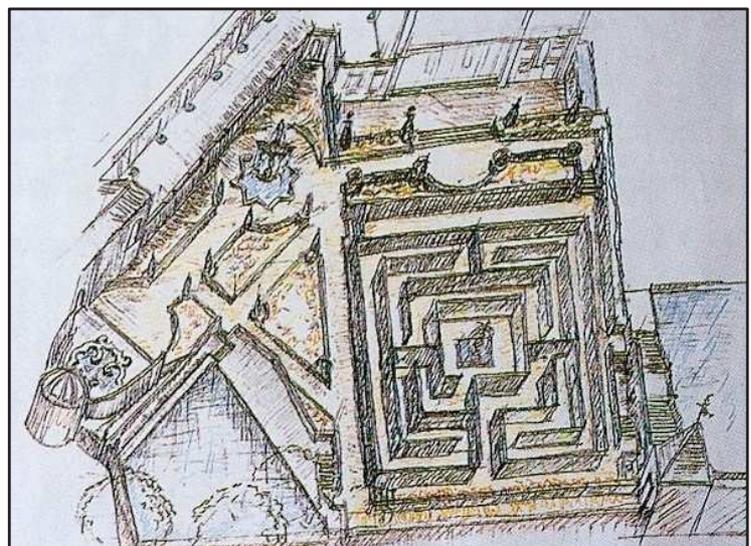


Carlos Soreto

---

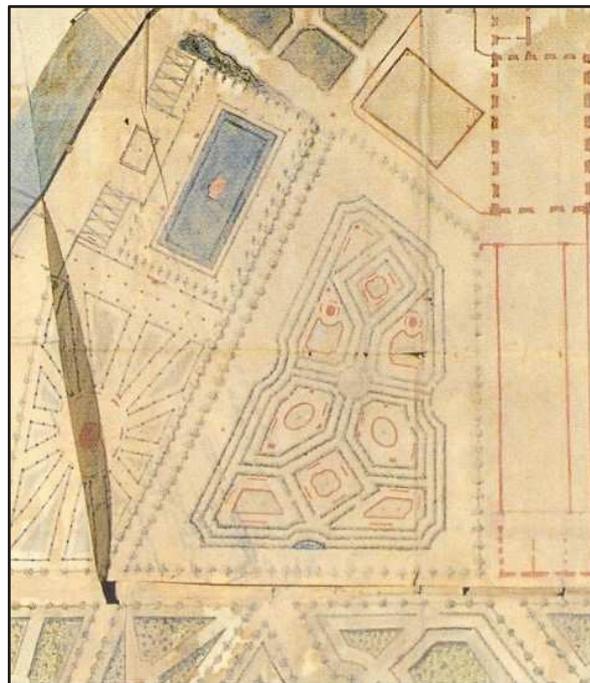
Gardens are amazing places where our senses enjoy the magical atmosphere created by the aesthetics of art together with the energy of nature. The art of building gardens is very ancient yet the inclusion of a mystical symbol like the labyrinth only began around the 14<sup>th</sup> century in private European gardens, and in public parks a few centuries later. From the Iberian Peninsula to Scandinavia, they flowered into a multitude of forms inspired by medieval labyrinths and more recently by classical designs.<sup>1</sup> As playthings of the rich and noble, or amusement places for children, the thrill they give has captivated and continues to puzzle many generations in search of a goal that, like our inner core, proves difficult to reach.

It seems that the taste for hedge mazes in the private gardens of aristocratic Portuguese families begins in the 1670s, according to a notarial record from 1673<sup>2</sup> where there is mentioned ‘an external walkway connecting to the oratory house which overlooks the labyrinth’ and describes the ‘building resting on four stone columns covered by a grove of trees and a small fountain and a pond’ at the centre of the maze that would have embellished the gardens at the Palácio dos Marqueses de Fronteira.<sup>3</sup> Five years later the French intellectual Alexis Collotes de Jantillet, who lived and worked at the royal court at Lisbon, visited the palace of Fronteira and in his book published in 1679<sup>4</sup> he describes the ‘beauty and elegance of the place,’ and mentions the centre of the labyrinth as a shady spot featuring ‘four elegant columns... with water spouting from a pyramid... originating from a lake...; near which lies a bed... where you can have a nap...’<sup>5</sup> This evokes the ‘Caza Armada en quatro Colunas de pedra Cuberta do mesmo Aruoredo’ (four stone columns shelter) mentioned in the record of 1673, and suggests that a bower, still in vogue in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as in the Oude Doolhof in Amsterdam (ca. 1610),<sup>6</sup> was a prominent feature of the baroque garden maze of this 17<sup>th</sup> century palace with the largest collection of Portuguese tiles in situ, located a few kilometres from downtown Lisbon.



*The maze at the Palace of Fronteira,  
plan by the architect  
Rodrigo Alves Dias, 1995*

About 10 kilometres from the palace of Fronteira, on the road from Lisbon to Sintra, at the royal palace of Queluz there was a fresco painting on a wall (recorded in 1772, but now lost), depicting a game of Blind's Man Bluff, whose diverting scenes, according to Simonetta Luz Afonso and Angela Delaforce 'once faced across to a labyrinth' likely linked with the 'idea of hiding in the complex puzzle of the maze.'<sup>7</sup> About 20 years after the Great Lisbon earthquake of 1755,<sup>8</sup> Richard Twiss, a British traveller who visited the palace, wrote 'There is a large garden behind this palace, with a labyrinth, and orange and lemon groves.'<sup>9</sup> Additionally, several financial records (from 1767 to 1782) and the existing ground plans of the palace kept at the Biblioteca Nacional do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, attest to the existence of a hedge maze in the gardens of the royal palace at Queluz in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Although the name of the garden, *Jardim do Labirinto*, still remains as a memory, the maze unfortunately has not survived, it was probably destroyed at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup>



*Palace of Queluz, ground plan of the lower level of the gardens (detail, mid-18<sup>th</sup> century). Garden of the Labyrinth (maze, bluish rectangle). Biblioteca Nacional do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*

Several other documents (both in paper and epigraphic inscriptions) from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, mainly from nobility villas from northern Portugal, mention the word 'labyrinth' (*labarint(h)o*, *labyrintho*), but as with those mentioned above, all of those mazes have disappeared over time. The only survivor, from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, is to be found at the Quinta da Prelada in Oporto, and in the same city there is another hedge maze at the Parque de S. Roque, although it is of modern construction, from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Prelada**

Quinta da Prelada is a baroque villa located in northern Oporto, a few kilometres from the city centre. Between 1743 and 1748 its owners, the Noronha e Menezes family, commissioned the Italian architect Niccolo Nasoni to create a plan for building a house and a garden including a box labyrinth (technically a maze). The maze was probably planted at that time because it is mentioned in *Diccionario Geographico* in 1758, as a 'box labyrinth with 72 feet and three quarters in side... with a good-looking symmetry.'<sup>11</sup> It was perhaps inspired by a design in a book about agriculture by a Catalonian friar from 1617 that features a similar square labyrinth,<sup>12</sup> whose figure 'may be worthwhile to those who are curious, and inclined to similar things.'<sup>13</sup> In the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century João José, the first Oporto municipal gardener, modified the gardens at Quinta da Prelada but no mention is made of the box hedge maze.<sup>14</sup> We have neither visitors' accounts, as in Lisbon, nor detailed descriptions of the role of the labyrinth in the romantic leisure atmosphere of the Quinta, but we can surmise that according to the Christian and pious stock of the Noronha e Menezes family, it was probably used merely as a playground for family entertainment.



*A maze (without solution) that could have inspired the maze at Prelada, in a book on agriculture by Fray Miguel Agustín, originally published in Catalan in 1617 (reproduced here from the 1722 Spanish edition)*



*The maze at Prelada, plan by A. Alvão, 1917. Photo: João Baptista*

The hedge maze, of rectangular shape, measures 24.5 by 32 metres and is to be found at the rear of the house. It has three visible entrances, though initially there should have only been one, from which the circular centre containing a 30 metres tall *Araucaria* tree, was reached. We don't know when the tree was planted, and according to a description published in 1909 by someone who was lost in the (already neglected) maze some decades previously, the central clearing would have featured some iron benches and also a rustic table surrounding the trunk of the tree.<sup>15</sup> The maze is formed of four concentric circles around the central point, leading into rectangular circuits of box shrubs ca. 1.2 metres high, with a path 90 centimetres wide and a 650 metre total length to the centre and back out. Over the years it has undergone some alterations, and according to João Baptista its present layout does not match the plan drawn in 1917 by A. Alvão,<sup>16</sup> an employee of Santa Casa da Misericórdia do Porto (the present owner of Prelada), and published in an Oporto newspaper article in 1943, where the solution of its path drawn by a puzzle enthusiast is shown.<sup>17</sup>



*The maze at Prelada, following restoration in 2013. Photo: Santa Casa da Misericórdia do Porto*

After the death of the last owner of the Noronha e Menezes family, in 1903, the aesthetic and joyful side of the Quinta was neglected as were the maze shrubs, but now, after undergoing a restoration process before its official re-opening in 2013, it is a pleasant place that deserves to be visited, and the maze is fully grown and once again looking splendid, waiting to be threaded... all for free.

### **S. Roque**

Not too far from Quinta da Prelada there was another villa, that once belonged to the wealthy Port wine traders Ramos Pinto and Calem family, the Parque de S. Roque. The palace-like house built in 1792, and the rest of the park, was acquired in 1978 and 1979 by the Oporto municipality and on 20<sup>th</sup> July 1979 the park was officially opened to the public. Arranged in a series of stepped terraces with an area of 45,000 square metres, it is located on a steep hill facing the Douro river, near the train station of Campanhã.



*The circular box hedge maze of S. Roque. Photo: João Baptista.*

The luxuriant box hedge maze, that according to some testimonies would have been planted around 1985,<sup>18</sup> is to be found near the main park entrance, on Rua de São Roque da Lameira, on a formal garden platform that provides its rectangular shape, bordered by camellias. The maze is of concentric type with a granite pillar surmounted by a teardrop shape ornament at its centre and measures ca. 30 metres in diameter with well-tended shrubs ca. 60 centimetres wide and 1.5 metres high. The path, approximately one metre wide, can be entered at two different points. The park of S. Roque is open daily and can be visited in winter from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. and in summer from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., with the free admission.

Carlos Soreto, Tocha, Portugal; April 2021  
Email: csoreto@gmail.com