

## **Gardens and COVID-19 effect: The managers' perceptions**

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**Keywords** | Gardens, COVID-19, effects, managers' perceptions

**Objectives** | Gardens are attractions in their own right. As such, a garden visit can be considered the most popular form of contemporary outdoor leisure activity (Benfield, 2013, 2021). The positive trend worldwide in garden visitation growth was only interrupted by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The consequences of this disruption, particularly for tourist attractions and tourism in general, are still being determined and it will take a long time to effectively assess them and understand their extent and depth. Sources of information are mainly reports on the impact on tourist gardens produced by the gardens themselves or by garden associations, and they show in particular a drop in visitor numbers, revenue, or staff employed. Besides these generalist impacts, some studies also examine the environmental impacts, the safety measures adopted, and the strategies implemented to reach the public (Hodor et al., 2021; Silva & Carvalho, 2023). More concrete opinions that go beyond the essentials of the COVID-19 effect in these visitable spaces are yet to be established. The purpose of this work is to find out what garden managers believe about the COVID-19 effect on gardens. The focus is on two main areas, the visiting and the managing, from both a general perspective and related specifically to the garden managed.

**Methodology** | A quantitative and exploratory research approach was applied to a group of selected gardens considered major tourist attractions, which included Portuguese gardens and gardens from the European Route of Historic Gardens (ERHG). A total of 33 sites contributed to this study, of which about 60% are from Portugal and the rest are from Spain, Italy, Germany, Poland and Greece. The data were obtained through an online survey questionnaire applied to the managers in the last quarter of 2021. For the present work the following topics were evaluated: i) general considerations about the effects of the pandemic on gardens; ii) garden management and visitation during the pandemic and post-COVID-19 periods, regarding their own gardens. A five-point Likert scale was used for the evaluation to quantify the data more easily and obtain more detailed answers that revealed different stages of opinions. A simple descriptive analysis was performed.

**Main Results and Contributions** | Regarding the first topic, the positive effects of the pandemic stand out. These effects were particularly related to the gardens' attractiveness and image.

Diverting the domestic public to visit gardens due to the pandemic was the effect with the greatest consensus among respondents (reaching a mean of 4.0 on a Likert scale of 1 to 5). According to them, gardens were the most popular option for visits at the end of lockdown periods (3.9), and gardens even become the most popular attraction in the context of a pandemic (3.7). This latter perception is more pronounced for the ERHG gardens. However, managers disagreed with the fact that there is still a reluctance to visit gardens (2.0), taking them safe places to visit during a pandemic. Regarding the second topic, the managers stress that gardens were able to adapt to the safety requirements imposed (4.4), and also to seize the opportunity offered by the pandemic (3.6), thus revealing their resilience, ability to adapt and be proactive. These features are reflected in the intensification of digital actions (3.5), made possible by investment done in digital platforms (3.4), and the development of new points of interest (3.4), with an emphasis on the ERHG gardens, as a way of keeping in touch with the public and attracting new visitors. Managers also agree that the gardens were an alternative choice to visit during the pandemic and an alternative for domestic visitors, too (3.9), just as the local public has (re)discovered the gardens, which attracted new visitors (3.7). Regarding the reasons to visit a garden during the pandemic, two aspects were highlighted: one related to the general safety and the perception of low risk of virus transmission in gardens (4.1); and the other associated with specific features of gardens such as their spaciousness, the open air, and the contact with nature (4.2), the search for peace, quiet, and relaxation (4.1), and finally the renown of the garden (4.0). In terms of post-COVID-19 perceptions, managers outline a positive scenario for gardens, they expect an increase in visitors, particularly from abroad, and are more skeptical about the local market. According to them, the digital innovations implemented will remain in place (3.8), a position that features more strongly among the Portuguese gardens.

**Limitations** | First, these results are restricted to a small sample of gardens, which compromises the generalization of the results. In addition, some relevant tourist gardens didn't answer, and the information provided by them could have enriched this research, either by consolidating the results or taking them in a different direction. This situation reflects not only a lack of awareness of the importance of participating in this type of study, but also resistance to sharing information. The Associations to which most of the gardens belong should raise awareness among their members about this particular issue. Second, the absence or scarcity of empirical investigation compromises the comparative analysis of evidence and the enrichment of scientific knowledge.

**Conclusions** | The COVID-19 period has become one of the most disruptive and challenging periods in the recent history of tourism. There were huge consequences, which are still being counted and which we are still trying to understand. In the case of gardens, the findings of this study go further than merely establishing the obvious and immediate consequences. They not only

show the resilience of these spaces and their capacity to adapt, they also make it clear that they can create conditions to position themselves as alternative, safe places to visit, maximizing the opportunity offered by the circumstances. On the one hand, the general public, especially the local community, are clearly relevant; and on the other hand, the investment made in digitalization through the different platforms, has been very significant, although with different levels between the gardens. Both elements were determinant in resuming and maintaining these attractions during the pandemic. These findings are in line with conclusions already drawn in relation to certain other destinations or attractions, such as museums. These results could complement research literature about visiting and managing gardens during disruptive crises, notably during COVID-19, for which studies are very scarce. They could also provide some important insights to support strategies to prevent and/or mitigate future negative aspects resulting from disruptive circumstances.

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