

A photograph of a formal French garden. In the foreground, a rectangular stone pond with a central fountain. The garden is filled with manicured hedges, potted trees, and tall cypresses. The sky is bright and overcast.

# *French Garden Style*

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# *French Garden Style*

*French Garden Style* is a fresh and breathtakingly beautiful tour of France's finest gardens. Sensitively described and superbly illustrated, the atmosphere, the artistry, the sheer quality of the gardens spring forward from its pages. More than 30 gardens are featured – from the grandeur of Courances and the romantic elegance of Noailles, to the woodlands and glades of Le Vesterival and the painterly orchestration of colour at Kerdalo. They range in size from large estates to more intimate havens and show the extraordinarily rich diversity of gardening styles that exists within France.

As well as exploring the classically formal gardens whose origins lie in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the authors include those that have been adapted or altered over the years to suit more contemporary tastes. Gardens that have evolved within the lifetime of their present owners and those created by the best of today's garden designers bear witness to France's continuing mastery of style. The differing approaches to garden design vary as much as does the landscape and climate of France: indeed, many gardens are a subtly manipulated reflection of their surroundings; others are geometric in plan; some show a strong English influence while others look to Italy for inspiration; some are guided by colour harmonies; others owe much more to their owners' love of collecting plants; many are the product of a personal vision. Each divulges the designer's sense of structure and imaginative flair as well as the owner's predilections and passions.

With 250 full-colour photographs which perfectly capture the potent magic of each garden, *French Garden Style* is a book to fuel dreams; but it is also a book to plunder for its hundreds of inspiring ideas.







# In the hills of Saint Paul de Vence

'Make me a garden to last forever'; this was the brief given by a wealthy German industrialist to landscape artist Jean Mus. It was a magnificent commission: Mus would be allowed complete freedom, with no interference in his designs; and, what is more, the client would abide by his aesthetic preferences and impose no financial limits. Here then was an extraordinary, wonderful opportunity for Mus to use all the powers of his imagination, and to bring to life ideas that – through lack of resources – had until then existed only as dreams.

When Mus was first approached in 1984 the house was surrounded by little more than a forest of pine and holm-oak; and, because it was situated close to Saint Paul de Vence, in the Provençal hills above the Mediterranean coast, the arid, sun-baked landscape and the need for a water supply – both for fertility and as a focus of pleasure – had to be taken into account.

Drawing upon an endless store of images and recollections, Mus put all his soul into the creation of the design and the garden is now a kind of entertainment, a theatrical spectacle, a walk to enchant the senses. Covering about five hectares (twelve acres), it was executed in only two and a half years. He is intensely pleased. 'The garden makes me want to shout and sing for joy, to the sound of mandolins and zithers.' The owner seems almost incredulous and his wife, too, feels, 'I can't believe all this is ours.'

A succession of changing views, sudden openings and vistas all help to catch the eye. The visitor is drawn along, enticed by scent, colour and shape, by the structured layout and the sounds of fountains and cascades. The place has an extraordinary atmosphere, like a dream landscape. Walking out of the house, the turquoise water of the swimming pool in the middle of a broad green lawn sets the tone of enchantment. A sweeping border of herbaceous plants, which curves round in thoroughly

#### RIGHT

*Cypresses and terracotta pots overflowing with ivy-leaved geraniums border a decorative paved walk to the house.*

#### OPPOSITE

*Simple steps set like stepping stones in grass lead through a canopy of native trees to a quiet circular clearing where the darkness of the surrounding forest opens out into Mediterranean sunlight. In a scene of perfect balance between the formal and the informal, the eye is led through to the curving path on the other side by the urn on a pedestal that matches the one at the top of the steps.*



English style, forms a backdrop of massed hemerocallis, azure perovskia and agapanthus. To the right, you look through to a paved pergola hung with sweet-smelling creepers, including several jasmines, for example *J. officinale affine* (syn. *J. 'Grandiflorum'*) which is used for making perfumes in the nearby hills of Grasse. For conversation in the evenings, when the setting sun seems to intensify all the scents, there are inviting seats surrounded by aromatic plants. It is delightful to sit there pinching the leaves – citrus, sweet or spicy – and guess whether they are from sage, citronella, thyme or mint.

Continuing along the path, you come upon an astonishing sight: carefully graded steps that lead up to an arched arbour almost collapsing under the weight of jasmine and wisteria. The Italian effect is enhanced by vertical spires of cypress on either side. All around, carpets of pink thyme give way, in midsummer, to a sea of blue lavender, spread out under silvery olive trees. Jean Mus is particularly fond of this typically Provençal association of colours. He went to Spain, to Andalusia, personally to choose the olive trees. They all have the beautiful, charcoal-grey



LEFT

*A charming stone terrace shaded from the sun and cooled by an idyllic fountain – a wall turned into a curving cascade. This watery fantasy delights the ear and eye, and pleases the flag irises (*Iris pseudacorus*) planted by the edge of the pool.*

RIGHT

*The landscape of the south has inspired this scene: carpets of wild thyme (*Thymus serpyllum*) in shades of mauve over the sun-baked soil. Thyme and lavender, sombre cypresses, silvery-toned olives and flowering lemon trees make a delightful, scented composition.*

BELOW

*This part of the garden has a wonderful sense of space. Paths lead round huge borders of ground-cover plants such as *Hypericum calycinum*, summer-flowering heather, lavender and *Senecio 'Sunshine'*. Olives, cypresses and Aleppo pines complete the picture.*

gnarled and twisted trunks which great age bestows – indeed, one near the pergola is apparently more than five hundred years old – and needed enormous care to transplant.

From here you are led down through a forest of pines and holm-oaks to a circular clearing. The path in and out of this curved green 'room' is on an east-west axis so that the sun rises and sets in the clearing – a reference to the theme of eternity specified in the original commission. The dimensions of the clearing seem to be in perfect proportion to the height of the mature trees. From this point you are led on by the sound of splashing to an extraordinary scene of falling water, then on to a maze built in the woods.

The further you go from the house, the more the garden merges into the forest, with ground-cover plants which grow wild in the region. Sheets of periwinkle, *rubus*, fern and ivy conceal an integrated system for watering the garden and fighting the fires which can cause such devastation in the south of France.

All these delights can be enjoyed throughout the year and it is no wonder that when they are here the owners spend more than an hour every morning and evening walking round with their friends. After months spent in the grey light of inland Europe, in an industrial environment where time is of the essence, to come to this garden with its golden Mediterranean light, and its intimations of eternity, must be like stepping into quite another, enchanted world.





# At Saint Jean Cap Ferrat

So admirably does the Italian vocabulary of garden design suit this site, that one could easily imagine the garden to be in Italy. Its sheltered position in one of the warmest coves of the French Mediterranean, on the peninsula of Saint Jean Cap Ferrat, means that the climate, too, suggests Italy.

The owners had had a house and swimming pool here for some years and then acquired an adjoining, narrow strip of land that stretches down to a ledge overhanging the sea. Here they built a house for their guests, which is Palladian in inspiration – reflecting their predilection for Italy, designed by André Svetchine. It was Svetchine who advised them to approach Jean Mus to resolve the problem of creating a garden for the new house that would effectively link it to the main building on a different level. The commission was a challenge for the designer; although the surrounding landscape is stunning, the tongue of land slopes steeply and ends with a precipitous drop down to the sea, toppling boulders and the coastguard path which winds in and out of jagged inlets. It was also necessary to conform to local legislation on planning and conservation; since the garden is visible from a great distance in the curve of a wide bay, the basic contours had to be preserved and the original vegetation kept or replaced with other native species.

Mus felt that everything pointed to an Italian layout for the garden. To link the two properties, he cut straight through the hill, making a line of sight between the two houses. Then he used traditional Italian devices to link the two levels, contriving vistas and linear patterns, constructing terraces and steps, and using terracotta pots and cypress trees to provide the vertical element.

The house for guests on the upper level opens on to a terrace which at one end is closed by a loggia projecting over the sea and at the other end leads to a dramatic

## OPPOSITE

*The magnificent flight of steps and the stretch of green turf which runs parallel to the sea serves as a link between two houses. Aleppo pines tower above a bank covered with flowering plants, which are tolerant of salt spray and dry soil. In the foreground the long pointed leaves of oleanders stand above white *Argyranthemum frutescens*. Cascades of pink ivy-leaved pelargoniums and orange gazanias complement the orangey-pink terracotta tiles and pots which line the steps. The cypresses, looking almost as though they might topple into the sea, contribute to the distinctively Italian ambience.*

staircase which sweeps downwards. Wide, tiled steps, their risers covered with creeping verbena, are punctuated with four pairs of containers planted with standard bay trees clipped into mopheads. Ivy-leaved geraniums cascade down the centre of the steps towards a peaceful expanse of emerald-green grass, which in turn leads to the terrace belonging to the main house.

The proximity of the sea is not a problem, as even in stormy weather little salt spray reaches the plants growing in this promontory garden. On the cliff to the north Mus retained the soaring Aleppo pines which had grown there for many years and planted young specimens of the same tree to the south. Sometimes known as 'Jerusalem' pines, these trees feature in many of Mus's designs; he values them for the hazy outline they make, the writhing trunks that come from leaning towards the light, the silvery pink colour of the bark and the perfume of their needles. As well as all this, they offer no objections to dry soil and sea spray.

To make the most of the glorious backdrop of the sea, Mus used a marine colour scheme of blue, green, grey and white for the plants in the garden. In the blue range, he chose agapanthus, light blue *Plumbago auriculata* (syn. *P. capensis*) to grow up the fences and walls, luminous perovskia and, of course, lavender, while the little mauve-veined white bells of *Solanum jasminoides* 'Album' look enchanting scrambling over a low wall. Grey called for santolina, cut back before it can flower, all sorts of artemisia, the velvety leaves of *Helichrysum thianschanicum* (*H. lanatum*), and shimmering silver *Convolvulus cneorum*, with its charming white flowers. White is represented by scented jasmine and white ivy-leaved geraniums. Jean Mus always uses a range of different greens, here preferring reliable plants like *Pittosporum tobira nanum*, which is resistant to coastal conditions, and the white-flowered evergreen *Myrtus*





**ABOVE**  
The recently built paved terrace of the guest house allows glorious views over the Mediterranean.

**LEFT**  
Looking up the steps to the guest house shows just how every inch of available earth has been used to grow flowering plants. The risers are host to carpeting plants such as pink verbena, *Erigeron karvinskianus* (*E. mucronatus*) and *Pericaria capitata* (*Polygonum capitatum*); ivy-leaved pelargoniums spill over specially designed containers in the centre; and the terracotta pots with standard bay trees are underplanted with *Erigeron karvinskianus*.

*communis tarentina*. In front of these, he has placed *Nandina domestica*, whose foliage runs through a whole spectrum of colours during the course of the year. He has also included one of his favourite plants, *Olearia traversii*, for its glaucous colour and the foliage shaped like olive leaves.

Because the owners of the property wanted a garden full of flowers and colour, Jean Mus has brought in touches of pink here and there with *Pericaria capitata* (*Polygonum capitatum*), a pink-flowered ground-cover plant, which spreads rapidly on the poorest soils, and splashes of yellow with *hemerocallis* and *Cassia corymbosa*.

The effect of this combination of plants is bright, yet harmonious. Shapes and colours are handled with a sense of balance and proportion. Set in a formal architectural framework whose antecedents lie in some of the great terraced gardens of Italy, the mood of the garden seems to change with the sea, always offering a magnificent spectacle, whether smooth or tempestuous, bathed in sea mist or scoured by the Mistral.

# Le Vignal

For many years the hills round Grasse have been checkered with fields of scented flowers grown for the perfume industry: a patch of lavender or *Rosa × centifolia* here, a tiny vineyard there. In these hills, looking out over silvery hummocks of olive trees broken by dark, almost black columns of cypress, stands the Château du Vignal. Strictly speaking, it is not a château; built in the mid-seventeenth century as a coaching inn, it later became a prosperous farmhouse at the centre of its extensive agricultural estate. It was only a few years ago, after the property was acquired by a Dutch garden enthusiast, that the grounds were redesigned by landscape artist Jean Mus. A native of this sunbaked land, his prime objective was to integrate the garden into the surrounding landscape, using native shrubs and aromatic plants, with additional touches to convey a feeling of Tuscany.

Entering through the classical wrought-iron gates, your first sight is of the garden



#### OPPOSITE

*The steps here wind away from the swimming pool through clumps of Bambusa metake (now correctly Pseudosasa japonica) and a pair of cordylines whose spear-like leaves associate well with the foliage of Pittosporum tobira nanum. Behind the two trunks is a paler green mound of Griselinia littoralis. The presence of cypress and olive trees is a constant reminder of the Mediterranean.*

#### OVERLEAF

*An orchard of olive trees underplanted with a sea of lavender makes a gloriously restrained composition. The colours reverberate: the lavender flowers echo the blue of the sky, and the grey foliage seems more intense under the canopy of silvery olive leaves. Massed like this, these two quintessentially Mediterranean plants express the true spirit of Le Vignal, while the scent from this mantle of blue makes its own contribution to the redolent atmosphere.*

#### LEFT

*Terracotta pots containing flourishing specimens of Camellia sasanqua 'Rosea' stand on each side of one of the main doors in the courtyard. The feeling of a leafy green oasis is enhanced by shrouding the walls in Boston ivy.*

leading up to the old house. Here the layout is formal, reminiscent of Italy and very like the design of gardens in front of the prosperous old farmhouses of Aix-en-Provence. Jean Mus has retained the avenue of ancient pollarded plane trees and punctuated these with clipped cones of dark green box. At the end of the drive, you come to a courtyard with an old stone fountain and look up to the Mediterranean curved roof-tiles of the château.

On the other side of the house there are further resonances of Italy in the formal terrace which, at one end, culminates in a semi-circle of fastigate cypresses that curves behind a statue. Beyond the terrace, the garden looks out over the hills. Here all the lines are, by contrast, winding and informal. The wide lawn is bordered with massed clumps of silver-leaved plants (santolina, rosemary, lavender, *Phlomis fruticosa*, *Elaeagnus × ebbingei*), contrasting with the dark vertical of cypress trees. This is *Cupressus sempervirens*, cultivated since earliest times in the Mediterranean region and ubiquitous on the hills around the château. Impervious to wind and weather, like impregnable battle lines in the landscape, their narrow vertical outlines and dark shadows scarcely move when the Mistral blows. While they appear to stand guard over the countryside, they do indeed help to preserve it for the future, as their roots prevent soil erosion.

On the left, with a view down over Grasse, is the swimming pool, which has been given an exotic setting, with palm trees, corylines and bamboo. There are also some of the designer's favourite pittosporums, especially *P. tobira nanum*, a miniature shrub which forms evergreen domes and is particularly happy in this climate. It is lightly pruned for dense growth. In early summer, the discreet white blooms have a heady scent rather like orange blossom.

Further left is the Provençal garden, a masterpiece of sobriety based on native









plants, particularly olive trees and lavender, with shapes and contours, colours and scents all blending perfectly with the landscape. This combination has produced a beguiling effect, again with overtones of Tuscany.

The subtle references to Italy, the use of indigenous plants and the combination of massed silvery plants shows the influence on Jean Mus of two designers who, among others, he greatly admires: Russell Page and Tobie Loup de Viane. Russell Page may be said to have imported the English gardening style into France, modifying it according to site or weather, softening the straight lines copied from Italy and creating a gentler atmosphere by making use of massed silver- and grey-leaved plants. Tobie Loup de Viane, a southerner like Mus, liked to go plant hunting and was responsible for re-introducing a number of apparently lost species, such as *perovskia*, which, with his superb colour sense, he

**ABOVE**  
*This old stone capital, discovered when the garden was being constructed, has been made into a fountain. It lies to the right of the main avenue (seen opposite). The coolness and splashing water are much enjoyed by the *Acer palmatum dissectum* on the left and the *fuchsia 'Riccartonii'* on the right.*

**OPPOSITE**  
*The avenue of pollarded planes interspersed with cones of box leads from the handsome wrought-iron gates to the main doors. Inspired by the traditional garden design of old, well-to-do farmhouses near Aix-en-Provence, it is also reminiscent of Italy.*

combined beautifully with local plants and shrubs.

The colours of Vignal are those Mus most likes to use: blue, white and grey – the blue of the southern sky, the white foam of the Mediterranean, and the silvery foliage of olive trees, always present in the hills around Nice. Here Mus has set olive trees against lavender planted in massed drifts of soft blue, creating an effective combination of scent and muted colour.

The Italian resonances that greet you in the formal approach to the house are echoed in its courtyard, in the garden's architectural details and cypress-fringed terrace, and in its Mediterranean surroundings. Against the setting of olive and cypress trees, of scented fields and grassland where sheep graze on their way up to summer pastures, Mus has succeeded in creating a garden which is so perfectly in tune with its environment that it seems to have been there for ever.