

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Improving the value of your property & your standard of living

With 300 days of sunshine a year, the French Riviera lifestyle is all about outdoor living. Whether you have hectares of space or a small, urban terrace, even a few simple touches can drastically improve the quality of a garden – and the value of your home.

By ELSA CARPENTER

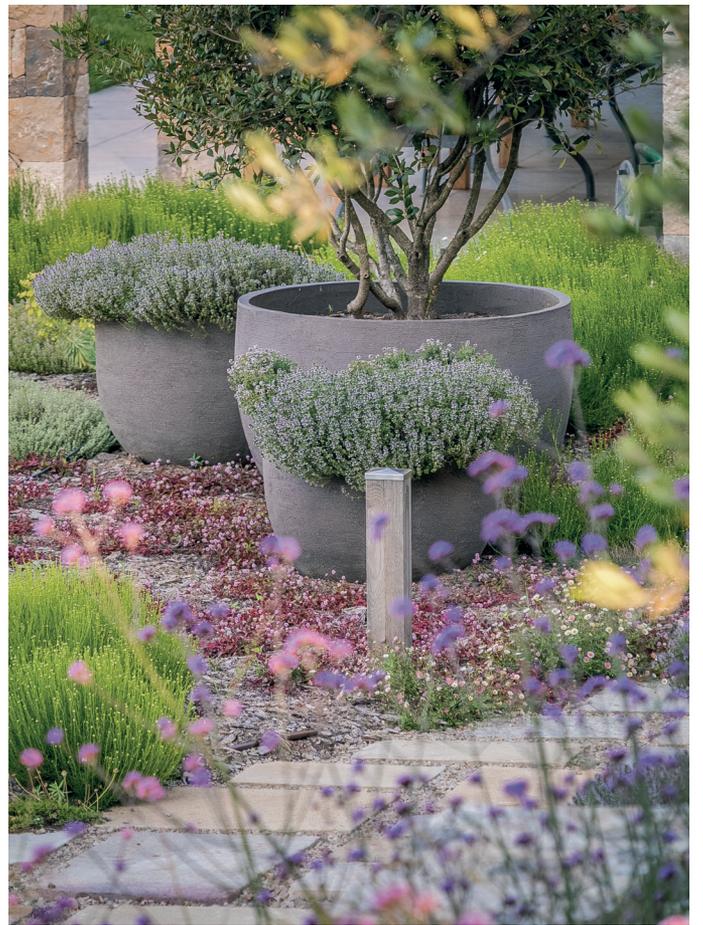
At the end of the property tour, as the owner opened the French doors, the deal is decided. Beyond a terracotta-tiled patio framed by oleander, a grassy slope studded with olive trees and young, silvery pines extended down to a little brook. The lawn was in a poor state and a pomegranate tree in the far corner was bare of fruit or leaves, but the desire to rush out into the garden was immediate and overwhelming.

In the words of renowned French garden designer and architect, Jean Mus, the perfect garden should ‘excite emotion and arouse all five senses’. It should bring pleasure – the tangible and intangible – and inspire.

James Hartley of the English Garden, which he founded two decades ago with his brother William while they were in their early 20s, believes that the outside spaces of a property are just as important as those inside – if not more – and should be treated with equal attention if they are to achieve their potential.

“Thanks to the climate of where we live, we spend much of our time outdoors,” says the 42-year-old, who studied horticulture at Imperial College London prior to starting his now well-respected business. “Our company philosophy is not to sell plants or even gardens, but to sell the concept of outdoor living. A well-designed garden can dramatically change the ambiance of a property and the experiences you have. If you feel nice in a place then you’re going to enjoy living there.”

Depending on the agent or agency you ask, estimations of how much value a tastefully landscaped can add to a property range from 5 to 40%. It is a similar prognosis



for how much you should budget for a garden project. “Typically, people should be looking to invest 5 to 10% of the overall property value in the garden,” says Hartley, “but the cost should really be about balance and finding a comfortable figure for the client. On average, spend is between €100 and €200 per square metre, but this can go either way. We worked with one client who spent €250,000 on a 125sqm balcony in Cannes!”

It is relatively straight forward to quote the cost of a lawn space or the individual price of plants, for example, but the final total is harder to quantify in the early stages. Does the land need landscaping or soil? Are there hidden obstacles that could slow down the works? As with every construction or development, there may be unforeseen issues and challenges that will need to be overcome. Creating the perfect garden is a labour of love.

“Even at the end of a project, defining the value is almost impossible,” Hartley continues. “Some gardens will continue improving over the years, while others decline. It’s very important to have a good and reliable gardener who understands the space and its needs. That said, it can be very difficult to find the right person in the south of France!”

Mus – with humour – concurs, “20% are good gardeners and 80% are amateurs who deliver banal results – just like kitchen planners! Despite this, you can always improve your garden. It depends on the budget you are willing to invest, but sensitivity in design is essential above all else. As with the preparation of a gourmet meal, it is less a matter of money and more of composition. Even



with humble ingredients, delicious dishes can be created.”

Still, both men recommend consulting a professional gardener or landscape architect before embarking on a project.

“The mistake many people make is focusing too much on the small details,” says Hartley. “You have to consider the garden in the same way as a living space. Think of it as a scene and look for the lines of sight. You wouldn’t paint all four walls of a room a different colour so why would you do the same in the garden? Keep it simple and be rigorous with the colour palette.”

The English Garden recently completed a project in the region that was designed to echo the natural landscape of the hinterland of Nice by using plants such as santolina, polygonum, thym and wild daisies tinged with pink along with traditional olive trees. Hartley’s advice: if you’re planning to manage the project and maintenance yourself, you should do your research ahead of any planting to ensure you have the right selection of plants for your soil and the climate.

“There’s an imaginary line that splits the region,” he explains from the English Garden offices and nursery between Valbonne and Roquefort-les-Pins. “The coast back to Mougins is relatively fuss-free and you can grow the quintessential plants of the Mediterranean quite happily. As you get closer to the mountains, night-time temperatures drop so hardier plants are needed.”

The soils in the south of France are calcium-rich with an average of pH 7.4, he explains, meaning that acid-lo-

Far left photo
“THINK OF IT AS A SCENE...
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Centre photos
A RECENT PROJECT BY
ENGLISH GARDEN DESIGNED
TO REPLICATE THE
HINTERLAND OF NICE

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Right photo
WILLIAM & JAMES HARTLEY,
FOUNDERS & OWNERS OF
ENGLISH GARDEN

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ving plants that you would recognise from typical English gardens in Dorset or other parts southern England – like rhododendron or camellia – will struggle to grow here.

Palm trees might be the signature plant of French Riviera (just think of the iconic Palme d’Or of the Cannes Film Festival or the tree-lined Promenade des Anglais in Nice), but they may one day be gone from the region completely due to the threat posed by the red palm weevil. Larvae of the invasive species, which originates from Southeast Asia, feed on the soft fibres of the trunk before moving towards the interior of the palm making tunnels and large cavities. By the time the damage is visible, the attack has normally been so serious that the tree will ultimately die. Cases number in their thousands across the south of France.

“The nursery used to be a lot more exotic, but in recent years, we’ve moved towards more naturalised plants that are simpler and easier to grow, but can also provide some interesting shapes,” Hartley continues. “There are basically no palms left in our nursery and we wouldn’t encourage anyone to buy them now.”

You can add value to the garden by making strategic and lasting changes – subtly and creatively shielding a space from overlooking neighbours or enhancing the beauty of a view by framing it with beautiful foliage. Lighting is important too if you want your garden to flourish by night as it does by day.

“The sun and moon should be the main sources of light,” says Mus. “The moon can act like a candle and create a very special atmosphere, but if that is not enough, you should set your lighting to enhance the natural elements.”

Numerous yet inconspicuous lights will help create a more sophisticated setting and elevate your garden to a desirable alternative to your indoor dining room or lounge.

“The amount of the budget that we allocate for lighting is often something that surprises clients,” says Hartley. “It is probably the item in the garden that has the biggest price range – from €20 to €200 for a quality product.”

All that remains is patience. No matter what the budget or space, a garden will take time to settle in and reveal its true character. A garden will maybe never be perfect – as is the nature of all living, breathing things – but we will start the journey by reseeding the lawn! ▀