





The cliff-edge garden

Luberon, Provence

Louisa Jones explores the green terraces and precipitous terrain of a remarkable new garden where the challenges of a vertical cliff face and even a landslide have been turned into landscape advantages

Photographs by Clive Nichols

IN the Luberon region of Provence, a string of ancient, medieval villages perch on hilltops and cling to the steep slopes; below them, the lush valleys nurture vineyards, orchards, melons and the sun-warmed vegetables sold in the many traditional markets. Summers are fiercely hot, but winters correspondingly cold but bright, and with a light that has inspired artists for centuries. The rough limestone cliffs are scented with wild thyme; there are grottoes and great restaurants—a wonderful place to visit, as thousands do, but to make a garden?

The elegant home shown here, at the top of a semi-fortified, medieval village, was first inhabited in the 11th century and has since served as barracks, monastery and aristocratic residence.

The house reaches out into a series of linked courtyards on different levels, perched high above the valley and opening onto a limitless vista.

Most unusually, the greater part of the garden lies some 200ft below, at the foot of the stone rampart that holds up the village, the total area, upper and lower, covering about two acres. A spiral staircase in a stone tower sits hard up against the rampart and looks convincingly medieval, but it was recently made by local craftsmen to connect the courtyard gardens with the slender terraces down below. And immediately at the foot of the tower, the ground opens out to contain a semi-formal swimming pool, leading to an orchard of

The main courtyard by the house. The site was restored after a landslide, its repairs also ensuring the village itself is underpinned

mature cherry trees on three levels, and a new potager, all linked by a wild path zigzagging up the rough cliff wall.

The present owners have added a new chapter to the rich history of this site, helping the village immeasurably by their restoration efforts. In 1986, they bought the property on an annuity scheme—not uncommon in France, whereby the vendors can remain in residence until such time as they are ready to leave. In 1993, with the sellers still in residence, the main retaining wall collapsed into the garden below, and

the buyers had to rebuild. The insurance company first refused to reimburse 'dirt', but finally accepted that the garden was really an 'outdoor room'. A souvenir of that event remains half-embedded in the garden below:

'We live outdoors here much of the year. The garden lets us be part of something growing'

a huge boulder, like an earthly comet.

In 1997, various landscape designers were consulted, but as Michel Biehn, master of Provençal interior design, was already transforming the house into Ali Baba's cavern, he turned his hand to the outdoors, working with local nurseryman Jean-Claude Appy to ensure that the chosen plants suited the location.

The garden today is a thrilling melange of agreeable spaces set off by the shapes and textures of mainly middle-size shrubs and small trees. These include local, readily shaped broadleaf evergreens: box, *Viburnum tinus*, rosemary, bay, arbutus. Cherry, fig, apricot and mulberry trees provide rustic seasonal highlights. Waves of wildflowers carpet much of the lower garden throughout the long Provençal spring, as half-wild honeysuckle, ivy and highly scented star jasmine (*Trachelospermum* spp.)







Previous pages Sheltered but open, the upper garden has a vast, panoramic view. *Above* On the upper garden terrace, very much an outdoor room, plantings are kept to sober white, greens and greys, but the furnishings and pavings, although muted and subtle, continue the lavish mood of the interiors

scramble over rough places in the shade. Up by the house, box-edged squares surround white peonies and Iceberg roses, with *Solanum jasminoides* in urns. White flowers predominate, but Frankie Coxe, who has made a name for herself as a garden designer in the locality, explains her horticultural contribution in recent times: 'When I tried using a lot more varieties, it diluted the visual impact. Plain vanilla may not seem very exciting, but, in fact, in summer, when it's really hot, white can be very calming.' After all, there are opportunities for widening the colour

range in the little potager in the lower garden.

Another advisor and friend has left her mark here: the late Nicole de Vésian, whose own influential garden in the same region has become a place of pilgrimage for people interested in garden design. She died before work had truly begun, but from her, the owners learned to 'listen to the land', for they shared with her a love for the region's landscapes—half farmland, half wild—where rock and stone count as much as plants.

The resulting fusion of tastes from these various influences has produced a garden



Above Sitting and eating spaces must be well shaded in summer, sunny in winter, fragrant all year round. No two are alike. *Right* The lower garden, reached by a spiral staircase, offers a choice of activities

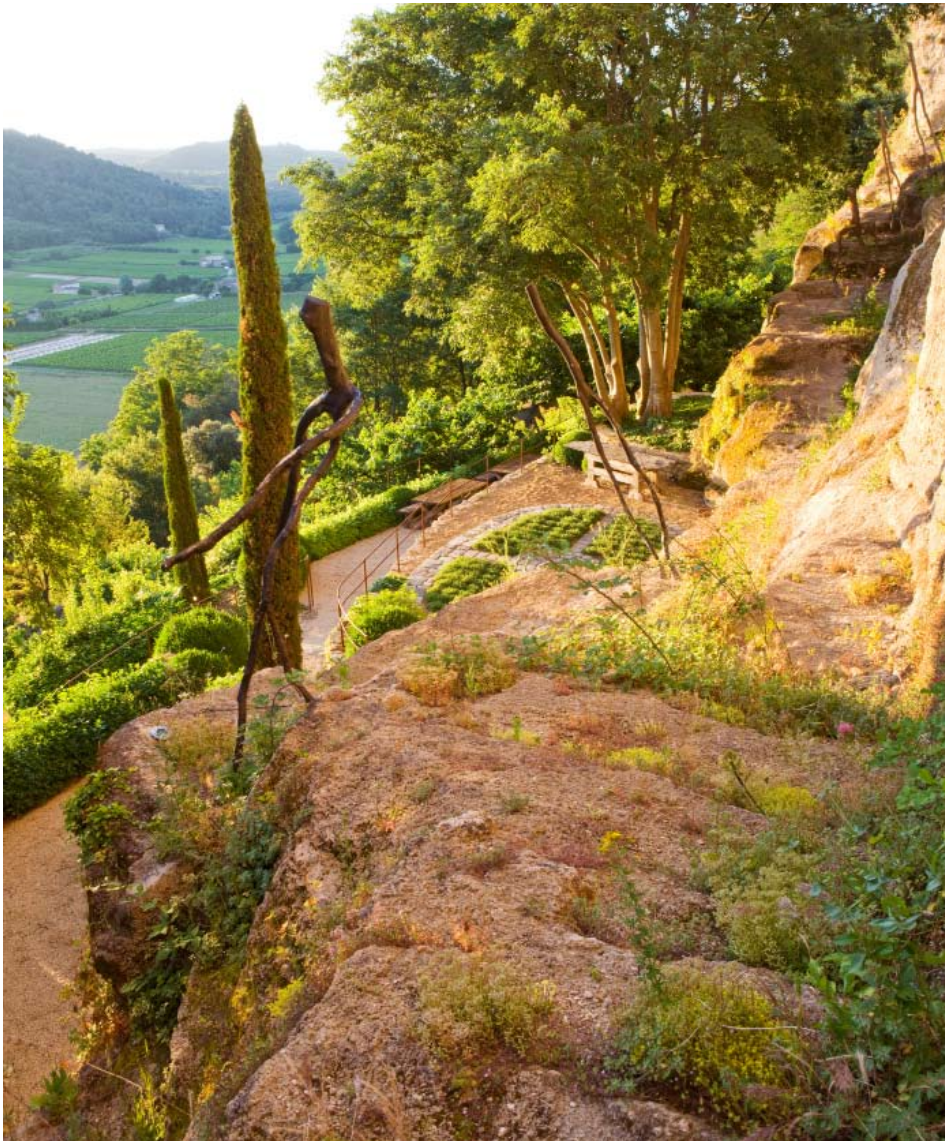
'You can't do a whole lot on paper here. You have to listen to the place. It just comes'

of rare distinction, with details and flourishes that set off the imagination: a harmony of planes and volumes organised from the house out to the horizon; a subtle rhythm of alternating abundance and void; solid form and airy mood; order and disorder.

Mediterranean gardens are, in this sense, always a kind of land art, an art of the land, determined by the site's past use and present connections to whatever lies beyond. This heritage, largely agricultural, makes garden design a precarious process. Mrs Coxe explains: 'You can't do a whole lot on paper. You have to listen to the place. It just comes, step by step.'

Sometimes the steps are dramatic: the upper level kept its original well and fountain, but lost all its trees when the cliff fell down. Newly planted mature specimens (mulberry, cypress, olives) now look completely at home. Their foliage variations contrast with a carefully orchestrated mix of furniture, paving and plantings in beautiful tones of brick, rust, beige, grey and cream. This is a kind of restrained transition from the more lavish house style to a simpler, rustic mood. Objects are here





Above Under a sheer cliff, the lower garden reveals many moods on its slender terraces. An oval herb garden can be glimpsed below Marc Nucera's *Walkers*, made from forked tree branches, which stride over rocky outcrops. *Below and opposite page* Elegance in spades: Mrs Coxe alternates warm and cool shades on the upper terraces

Gardens are for living in

Nicole de Vésian advised making a garden for living, not just looking, once admonishing: 'There are never enough places to sit in a garden because people so often design for show.' Michel Biehn, always one for festivity, refuses room specialisation both indoors and out, so that all areas lend themselves equally to entertaining. Certainly, few gardens offer as many welcoming chairs (*below*) and tables as this one thoughtfully has. Beautiful meals can be—and are—served anywhere, from picnics to jazz concerts to formal dinners. This disposition reveals not only a generous desire to share, but also a deep conviction that gardens mean living outdoors as fully as possible.



'in conversation', as M. Biehn says, in graceful groupings, a convivial clutter, a perfect blend of fantasy and functionalism.

To this end, Provençal tree sculptor Marc Nucera has shaped olive crowns at the courtyard edge. They sit on the horizon like clouds, repeating the line of distant hills. Down below, his most impressive work is cliff-side. This remote part of the garden was once a garbage dump, roughly covered with dirt and wildflowers, but releasing debris with every heavy rain. Four hundred tons of refuse were removed to uncover wonderful rock shapes where M. Nucera's *Walkers*, fashioned from forked tree branches, now seem to stride across the promontory.

Mrs Coxe has recently designed a simple, effective sitting space below: an oval carpet of summer savory herb, outlined in limestone, surrounds an ancient fossilised seashell. Amazingly, the intimate terrace can be transformed into a dance floor. This is truly a garden made for enjoyment, and for sharing. 🐦



