





A new vision shared

*Chateau Le Plaisir,
Avignon, France*

Louisa Jones explores the Provençal estate of
a contemporary art collector, whose collaboration
with three leading designers has created gardens
of breathtaking imagination and serenity

Photographs by Clive Nichols



Previous pages Fig 1 The 17th-century Château le Plaisir, viewed from the Dry Garden.
 Above Fig 2 The orchard of young apricot trees rises from parallel lines of *Iris germanica*



IN Mediterranean Europe, elegant domains have been set among their own vineyards and orchards since Roman times, as Italian villas still are today. The Château Le Plaisir (**Fig 1**), just west of Avignon in Provence, is another example, first built in 1693 as a stylish hunting lodge. Because it stayed in the same family for five generations, it remained virtually unchanged except for a central tower added in the 19th century.

In 1993, exactly three centuries after it was begun, a distinguished Belgian collector of contemporary art fell in love with the place. The late Jacques Hollander was enchanted by Le Plaisir's refined architecture and its rustic setting, but he also had a Modernist sensibility. A distant view of the highest factory chimney in Europe—525ft—also pleased him. He found its blinking red light at twilight 'truly magic', and planted an avenue of cypresses to lead the eye in that direction.



Fig 3 The pool house was designed by Jean-Michel Wilmotte. The specially grafted weeping sophoras took ten years to mature, a process personally overseen by Pascal Cribier

On arriving at Le Plaisir, however, it is a wonderful gathering of giant plane trees that greet you between the gate and the *château's* front elevation. They have been outlined with cement paths around bare earth, so that the warm brown and beige of the ground pattern repeats the subtle tones of the massive trunks, which, in their turn, catch the particularly beautiful evening light. The simplicity of the front courtyard has a Zen-like quality.

M. Hollander chose collaborators capable, like himself, of blending avant-garde taste with a respect for heritage: a leading French architect, Jean-Michel Wilmotte, began updating, and, in 1996, he recommended landscape architects Pascal Cribier and Lionel Guibert. All three advisors share a love of pure form streamlined into its simplest elements, a minimalism that

blends perfectly with classic French formalism. All have given new life to other historic monuments—Cribier was part of the team that restored the Tuileries gardens in Paris in the early 1990s. At the same time, all three delight in texture, the movement of light and water, in seasonal change, in witty juxtapositions and dramatically unveiled surprises. At Le Plaisir, the resulting garden is a kind of theatrical performance, evolving from season to season.

M. Cribier refuses period restoration as such, but takes inspiration from site memory. He says: 'Every place has a history; there are no big and small places. One thing I love in gardens is the thickness of accumulating time, of passion, of concentration, all those decisions taken through the years to make not a project, but a place; a completely different thing.' His approach can

Making waves

One of the designers' most distinctive creations is a long, rectangular sweep, leading up the gentle hill away from the house, in thin lines of alternating pink-flowered perennial *Gaura* and two forms of box (the straight *Buxus sempervirens* species which grows wild in Provence, and the cultivar, *B. s. Rotundifolia*). In early spring, this area has strong linear definition, like a formal parterre. However, when the *Gaura* grows tall and blooms in summer, the box gradually disappears in a sea of movement and colour, only remaining visible when viewed from above.





Fig 4 Left The serpentine santolina parterre can be seen from within or from the bank above. The hedging here is clipped holly oak.



Fig 5 Right The sunlit field of *Gaura lindheimeri* backs the orchard, underplanted with the lines of iris and *Ballota pseudodictamnus*

be fanciful and irreverent: ‘When I begin working in a new place, it’s like opening the door of a friend’s refrigerator and making dinner from whatever I find inside.’

He may get his main idea within minutes of arriving on site; then, he takes a long time to explore previous land use, soil characteristics and changing light patterns at all hours and seasons. What M. Cribier found at Le Plaisir was a five-acre park of slightly rolling land, which Jacques Hollander had already enclosed with a stone wall low enough to allow views on surrounding orchards, olive groves and vineyards, also part of the estate. To the north, land was regraded into a hillock planted with poplars as a windbreak; such work is essential in the lower Rhône valley.

The patchwork of surrounding farmlands inspired Messrs Cribier and Guibert to experiment with grid patterns in the garden so that it now provides an elegant transition between the distinguished architecture (modernised by Wilmotte) and its country setting. For example, at the northeast corner of the property, a broad field was newly replanted with alternating rows of vines and lavender. This novel combination

of two archetypal local crops provides year-round pleasure, as, even in winter, the well-pruned vines are strongly graphic in contrast with the lavender mounds. The working landscape provides the theme, but the main aim is to create beauty; M. Hollander was most unhappy in the early stages when a caretaker ripped up an orchard of old, gnarled apricot trees because they were no longer productive.

The park’s open prospects are broken here and there by hedges of *Quercus ilex*, the evergreen oak that grows wild nearby, a plant rarely used by local designers as hedging. M. Cribier divides space in a way that creates gentle, half-transparent transitions so that the different parts of the garden, although rarely visible from afar, flow beautifully into each other. They include a santolina broderie with golden bank plantings (**Fig 4**); a green theatre with curtains made from pruned, fastigate olive trees; and the Fountain Close has its bulb collections, lotus plants and pergola of Japanese wisteria. There are two long lines of mixed fruit trees; a privet wood underplanted with a collection of jonquils; a water garden; a secret red garden; and

a small fruit-and-cutting-garden labyrinth. The densely planted Dry Garden (**Fig 6**) is full of butterflies across the season.

Today, visitors all agree that the park’s star display is its aforementioned Dry Garden, where a great variety of species came from the famous Filippi nursery near Montpellier, which specialises in drought-resistant plants, sourced from all over the Mediterranean region. Seen at its best in April, the area it occupies was first begun in quite another spirit, however. Pascal Cribier, who loves to explore local materials and techniques, was quite taken by a local craftsman’s work with moulded concrete. Together they designed a series of broad, slightly wavy slabs reminiscent of Roman paving (**Figs 1 and 6**). They are now assembled into two lines that give structure to a brilliant tapestry mixing many different rosemaries, euphorbias, achilleas, cistus, two species of *Convolvulus* (*cneorum* and *mauritanicus*) *Ballota pseudodictamnus* and much more, including bulbs such as *Muscari* species and wild tulips. Many of these plants self-sow, creating new patterns and tapestries in the process.

The Dry Garden is set off to one side,



Fig 6 Soft evening light in the Dry Garden sets off, among concrete slabs imitating Roman paving, the fragile silhouettes of *Dasyliiron wheeleri*, *Helichysum orientale*, *Achillea nobilis* and white *Centranthus ruber* just going to seed. The path here follows a zigzag pattern

but another strong design leads away from the terrace abutting the rear elevation of the *château*, beside ribbon beds of irises and *Ballota* (**Fig 2**). A long, striped garden was made entirely from lines of box hedging and a red-flowered form of *Gaura lindheimeri* (see boxed text).

Water (recycled and carefully controlled) is always present in M.Cribier's gardens. At Le Plaisir, there is a small but complex water garden near the *château*, formed from a series of squares of various heights set into each other. As the season progresses, its formal lines are gradually obliterated by a dense collection of water plants. In the Fountain Close, a Renaissance fountain adds its music, and, nearby, a tiny, reflective pool, shaped like an eye, has been cut into the ground.

Pascal Cribier did part of his training in a specialist nursery and keeps close ties with plantsmen. He likes to use swathes and lines of plants architecturally, but has made a specialty of ornamental pruning. Weeping *Sophora japonica* Pendula trees (**Fig 3**) by the outdoor pool were prepared over a number of years by Italian nurserymen, and he followed their development for more

'Gardens accumulate time, passion, concentration, those decisions taken to make not a project, but a place'

than ten years. A French garden writer notes that: 'For Cribier, a garden does not depend on a great mass of fancy materials or equipment, but on "holding" space, in the full sense of the word, thanks to the plants.'

Such effects are subtle, not immediately apparent, but the overall impression is nonetheless dramatic. The whole garden is festive and fanciful, with far too much happening to absorb on a single visit. Southerners sometimes find it too showy, and complain that the Parisian designers are insensitive to local conditions (planting, for example, the beautiful santolina parterre on land susceptible to flooding). But Le Plaisir makes the most of its theatricality, its unexpected revelations and surprise effects. Pascal Cribier compares

it to a musical composition, and clearly its sequences have been carefully "orchestrated". They are also multidirectional—there is no obvious itinerary.

Yet Le Plaisir holds one more surprise. Complex systems of lighting and sound cover the whole space, since Jacques Hollander liked to walk around to the tune of Mozart operas. Unfortunately, this talented patron of the arts passed away a few years ago. The gardens are well maintained today by two full-time gardeners, but still they survive like a sleeping beauty awaiting a new prince, as the members of M. Hollander's family, who live overseas, have now decided to sell Le Plaisir. Of course, they hope it will be taken up by someone who appreciates the complex partnership of artistic endeavour and plantsmanship that has produced a unique landscape in Provence. 🐦

Louisa Jones leads guided tours to outstanding private gardens in Provence, including Le Plaisir. For more information, visit www.louisajones.fr. Her latest book, 'The Garden Visitor's Companion', is published by Thames and Hudson at £16.95 and was reviewed in COUNTRY LIFE on xxx?