



Climbing Iceberg and Albertine roses garland the pergola, spangling the grass with petals

# Reinventing the farmstead

Louisa Jones explores a fine country garden comfortably settled into the vernacular of its sunny Provençal location

**A**LL over the world today, working farmsteads evolve into elegant country homes, redesigned for leisure and pleasure, embellished with gardens. Provence attracts a cosmopolitan public appreciative of summer festivals, year-round outdoor living, good food and wine and large stretches of unspoiled countryside.

Old farms, often called *mas* (a Latin-derived word related to the French *maison* and the English mansion) are rebuilt as *bastides*, country estates of a type that peaked around Aix-en-Provence in the 18th century. Historians describe the old *bastide* as 'a kind of rural habitat which combined an aristocratic or middle-class residence with a working farm and gardens... a place for leisure and repose. By the luxury of its appointments and the charm of its gardens, it betokened membership in the class privileged by Fortune'. Today, farmhouses in Provence undergoing gentrification may get a second storey, a more regular arrangement of windows and doors, a wrought-iron balcony over a main entrance, and, in general, greater symmetry.

The Lafourcade family has devoted more than 30 years to this kind of transformation, providing discerning clients with a blend of modern technology and regional authenticity. Bruno Lafourcade, his son Alexandre and their associate Claire Perraton work mainly with buildings, and Avignon-born Dominique Lafourcade, Bruno's wife, designs gardens that extend, complete and may even

at times inspire the restoration. Dominique's work is often called classical because she likes long perspectives and bilateral symmetry that go well with the *bastide* style, plus embellishments such as terracotta pots, ornamental pools and fountains, colonnades, formal gates and shady pergolas linking green rooms—features already used in the Roman estates that once flourished in this region.

Few of these attractions are merely ornamental, however; the logic of the vernacular is always maintained. This means, above all, good climate management—the proper dosage of sun and shade throughout the year, wind protection and water control—in Provence, there is either too much or too little! 'You build houses with images of the past you carry in your head,' says Bruno. 'You also need to be a countryman, to know how local winds blow, how a tree will project its shade onto the house in all seasons.' In the garden, this often means a skilful and elegant use of hedging. Dominique creates microclimates all around the house; some spaces are intimate and closed, others unveil dramatic and distant views. Each moves smoothly into the next so that, although the design is formal, the mood is all ease and pleasure.

In the Mas des Collines, Dominique gives full reign to both tradition and personal fantasy. This farmstead previously belonged to a local family, owners of the Souleiado fabrics company, the people who first helped Sir Terence Conran settle in Provence.



The house sits in a remote spot facing silver crags to the south-east. A loggia opens onto this spectacular view, indoors flowing into outdoors, with the swimming pool (raised and hidden) just steps away. In the local manner, the house is like the hub of a wheel so that you can walk all around it. The entry courtyard with discreet parking and the live-in caretaker's residence also has, nicely set back, an arch leading to the poultry yard, the home of rare and ornamental birds. Further on, protected by the house itself, is the rectangular vegetable garden with raised beds. On the south side is a simple parterre with roses, around a stone fountain,



**The front garden is formally edged with box, but complements the relaxed tone of the Provençal farmhouse vernacular**

the original well sheltered by very old Chinese paper mulberries (*Broussonetia papyrifera*, now sculpted by tree artist Marc Nucera), a small, playful labyrinth planted under a grove of young mulberries. Tucked into a corner of the building is a square 'Zen' garden made of stone slabs planted with *Erigeron karvinskianus* and creeping rosemary.

Everything is relaxed; all forms and patterns are simple, even minimalist. No pretentious statuary here, but a stone globe on a square base in cobblestone circle. Materials and textures are rustic, but assembled with care by the best local craftsmen. Intricate patterns

in paving help guide steps from one area to another. It's an easy garden to find your way around, and yet there is mystery, discovery—nowhere so much as in the intriguing suspended circle of *Solanum jasminoides* that, in fact, hides the swimming pool.

Pre-existing elements have been incorporated into the design in many places, such as old cypresses, remnants of agricultural hedging. Respect for site memory is part of the Lafourcade blending of tradition and modernity. Dominique reinvents the traditional Provençal green garden, agricultural and architectural, in which box or *Viburnum*

*tinus* parterres echo the patterns of surrounding fields. At this *mas*, between the clipped greenery of the parterres and the distant hills, stretch rows of lavender and an extensive olive orchard. Much care has gone into the framing of this progressive panorama organised from the near and middle ground—fountain and pergola—out towards the landscape. Benches or chairs set far out invite a leisurely look back towards the house. This mastery of graded views connecting garden and landscape is one of the most compelling features of contemporary design in Provence. ➤







*Preceding pages* The Alpilles range looms over the pergola and a rash of *Gaura*. *Clockwise from top* The box labyrinth with herbs and young mulberry trees; wire-sculpture friends by Rupert Till; a stone well at the end of the terrace; raised crops and squared-off rosemary in the potager; a clairvoyée lined with *Solanum jasminoides*, beyond which lies the swimming pool

Green gardens involve a limited plant palette, but one well chosen for site and climate. Broadleaf evergreens provide structure, especially species that lend themselves to shaping, such as box, laurel, *Viburnum tinus*, rosemary, arbutus, and so on. Floral highlights mark each season of the old gardens, with rosemary and viburnums in midwinter. Spring comes in several acts, starting with almond trees in February, then coronillas, Judas trees, Spanish broom, wisteria and irises. Also Banksian roses, flowering before the main rose season, then various lavenders finally ushering in summer. Many species go dormant in summer, but oleanders and

plants in pots provide colour. In the autumn, fruit tree and vine foliage can be brilliant, and the mulberries turn bright yellow. This traditional round is now enriched with current additions such as *Gaura* (here a whole field) and *Perovskia*. Fruit and vegetables ripen year round, and winter is the season for olive-pressing and truffle-hunting.

The whole picture shows a masterful orchestration of climate, scale, comfort and pleasure. Hanging in the Lafourcade workshop is a quotation adapted from the Roman poet Horace: 'He who mingles use and beauty, simplicity and grandeur will not have lived in vain.' [www.architecture-lafourcade.com](http://www.architecture-lafourcade.com)



