



# The whole world at your feet

*Domaine du Rayol, Le Rayol-Canadel, France*

Louisa Jones explores one of the loveliest spots on the Côte d'Azur, where wild gardening has been given a truly international perspective

Photographs by Clive Nichols



**S**OME 20 miles west of Saint-Tropez, where the darkly forested Maures mountains reach down rocky slopes to the pounding sea, the Domaine du Rayol is a handsome relic of times past, brought right up to date by subtle restoration and a reworking of its gardens.

These days, it presents a compendium of sample landscapes representing Mediterranean climates across the world, described with beautiful plant collections. But in the 1880s, this wild valley was known mainly by farmers working small terraced orchards among the chestnut trees. In the 1890s, a branch of the Train des Pignes railway brought tourists to the region and, in 1910, Parisian banker Alfred Theodore Courmes built an Art Nouveau holiday villa for his family at the top of the hill.

Between the World Wars, it became the Hôtel de la Mer, and, today, the villa is the



**Above** The former Hôtel de la Mer. In the foreground (left to right) are *Echium virescens*, *Euphorbia regis-jubae*, *Nauplius sericeus*, *Rumex lunaria* and *Asparagus pastorianus*. **Facing page** The walk begins with dramatic *Dracaena draco* from the Canary Islands

main reception building for the gardens, which are open to the public all year round. Other historic vestiges include a smaller Art Deco house with a formal garden on the eastern promontory, a fisherman's dwelling (now a guest house) and farm buildings, now the Café des Jardiniers. Allied landings nearby spared the Rayol, but a subsequent period of abandonment opened the site to potential speculation. In 1989, it was finally purchased by the French shoreline conservancy agency, the Conservatoire du Littoral.

This one hillside contains several characteristic vernacular landscapes linked to different microclimates. The Conservatoire invited Gilles Clément to invent a project that would embrace this natural diversity. M. Clément, who trained both as an agronomist and a landscape architect, prefers

to be called a gardener. He first became known in the 1980s for the concept of the 'Moving Garden'. Based on his own experience of reclaiming old fields, this is an approach in which humans encourage the natural dynamics of landscape growth. The ravine site at the Rayol is now managed as a Moving Garden: plants such as *Stipa* grasses are allowed to self-sow and their populations to evolve. The gardeners keep the site from reverting to forest and prevent any one plant, such as the intrepid acanthus, from dominating.

When first asked to make suggestions for the Domaine, Gilles Clément was working on an idea of the 'Planetary Garden'—the whole Earth viewed as a garden with humankind as caretaker—inspired by photos of the Earth as seen from the Moon.

He proposed a 'Jardin des Méditerranées' (Garden of Many Mediterraneans). This is not merely a collection of flora from Mediterranean climate regions around the world—something that other distinguished botanical gardens have already done—but an evocation of plant assemblages typical of other continents with growing conditions similar to the Rayol's. Mediterranean climate regions cover less than 2% of the planet's land surface, yet contain more than 10% of its plant species.

At the Rayol, each section has its stars. The Australian 'malee' shows off *Banksia*, *Eucalyptus*, *Grevillea*, *Acacia* (50 species) and *Callistemon* species, as well as kangaroo paws (*Anigozanthos*). The subtle colours of New Zealand grasslands set off *Metrosideros*, *Leptospermum* and a deep



shady valley of tree ferns kept moist with artificial mist. The South African *fynbos* has the densest concentration of species per square yard, many very colourful, including amaryllis, leonotis, restios, and the King protea (*Protea cynaroides*), which inspired Clément to make a mosaic by the grand pergola.

The evocation of Chile displays its zig-zag bamboos (*Chusquea* sp.), alstroemerias, various nasturtiums (*Tropaeolum* sp.) and cactus candles. The Canary Islands feature euphorbias and *Dracaena draco*; the California garden includes *Eschscholzia*, *Hesperaloe*, yuccas and ceanothus. Central America features *Washingtonia* palms, shrubby sages and a young forest of *Nolina recurvata*. A special rockery was created for the Mexican cactus garden. By the beach, an underwater garden has now evolved, for guided visits only. In-between spaces are maintained as meadow and light woodland. M. Clément took particular care to ensure that the gardens would not

be readable from above, and that no two geographical areas can be seen, as a whole, together. This garden must be discovered from within, through a kind of immersion that is always delightfully sensuous.

M. Clément and the Conservatoire botanists went tracking plants and photographing landscapes all over the world—an exhilarating adventure on a shoestring budget. The same spirit of enterprise inspires the team that runs the Rayol today, from the director Caroline Petit to the head gardener Stan Alaguillaume, who organises the Rayol's prestigious annual plant fair, Gondwana, held the first weekend of October. Philippe Deliau, originally M. Clément's assistant, now a designer with his own practice, has since helped re-create other Conservatoire properties, such as Lawrence Johnston's Serre de la Madone in Menton, and Alfred Nobel's dynamite factory in Paulilles, south-west France.

A 'planetary' garden on the French Riviera is a challenge at a time when

specialists worldwide are debating the environmental cost of invasive behaviour in imported species. Collectors have been acclimatising exotics here for more than two centuries—when M. Clément began working here, eucalyptus, acacias and callistemons were already naturalised. M. Clément has consistently fought native plant purism, and the Rayol gardens have become an experimental centre for exotic introductions, as well as for plants involved in the specifically Mediterranean dynamic of fire resistance. The gardeners keep testing and developing new varieties, of cistus, for example, with the encouragement of nearby nurseryman Jean-Marie Rey.

A visit to the Domaine du Rayol is both enjoyable and educational. A map is provided with the ticket, but only the most discreet signs tell you when you are moving into South Africa, for example. Any amount of information is readily available in the bookshop, the new Botanical Gallery and from workshops, but once you are in the



*Above* New Zealand's phormiums, Nikau palms (*Rhopalostylis sapida*) and tree ferns



*Above* The farm, which houses the Café des Jardiniers, harmonises with the landscape. *Below left* Australia's *Hakea laurina*. *Below right* Signposting for a change of habitat

garden, nothing obstructs the flow. Some 60,000 visitors come yearly. Most are delighted, but some are disappointed by the ecological management: grasses are not mown before going to seed; fallen leaves are left among the trees. The Rayol gardeners learned early on to rake the paths regularly to reassure visitors that this 'natural' garden is, in fact, carefully managed. As Christian Desplats, a Conservatoire regional spokesman, explains: 'We are trying to help visitors learn that a Mediterranean garden is magnificent in spring, superb in the autumn and marvellous in the winter—but dry in summer.'

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