

Above: For the 250th anniversary of the Royal Botanical Garden of Madrid, Fernando created the Laurel

Moroccan Life

For 30 years, Maurières and Ossart have exerted their influence over French garden design; now they have turned their attentions to a major project in Morocco

Words Louisa Jones Photography Clive Nichols

Arnaud Maurières and Eric Ossart have deeply influenced French gardening over the past three decades, both in the public sphere and in private homes. As head gardener at the Festival des Jardins at Chaumont-sur-Loire from 1993-1999, Eric Ossart planned and planted 'in-between spaces' as well as the festival plots. His joyful mix of annuals, perennials, grasses, kitchen herbs and vegetables – a style which he

and Arnaud Maurières had first invented for city plantings at Blois – was then taught at the Chaumont school to professional urban gardeners. Known as *le nouveau fleurissement* (the new flowering), it replaced bedding out in key public parks all over the country.

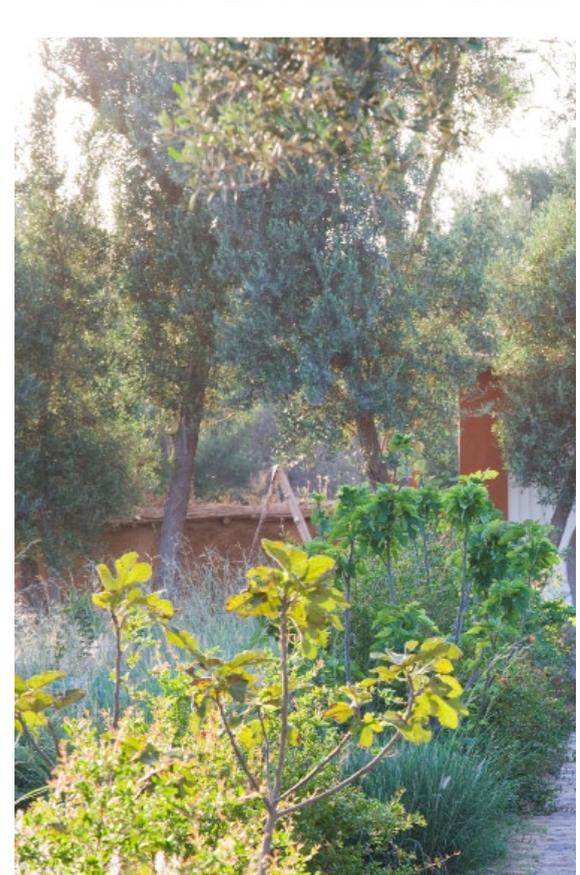
Maurières also influenced young designers as art director at the 'Salon des Jardins' in Paris. In Grasse, on the French Riviera, he founded a school for Mediterranean

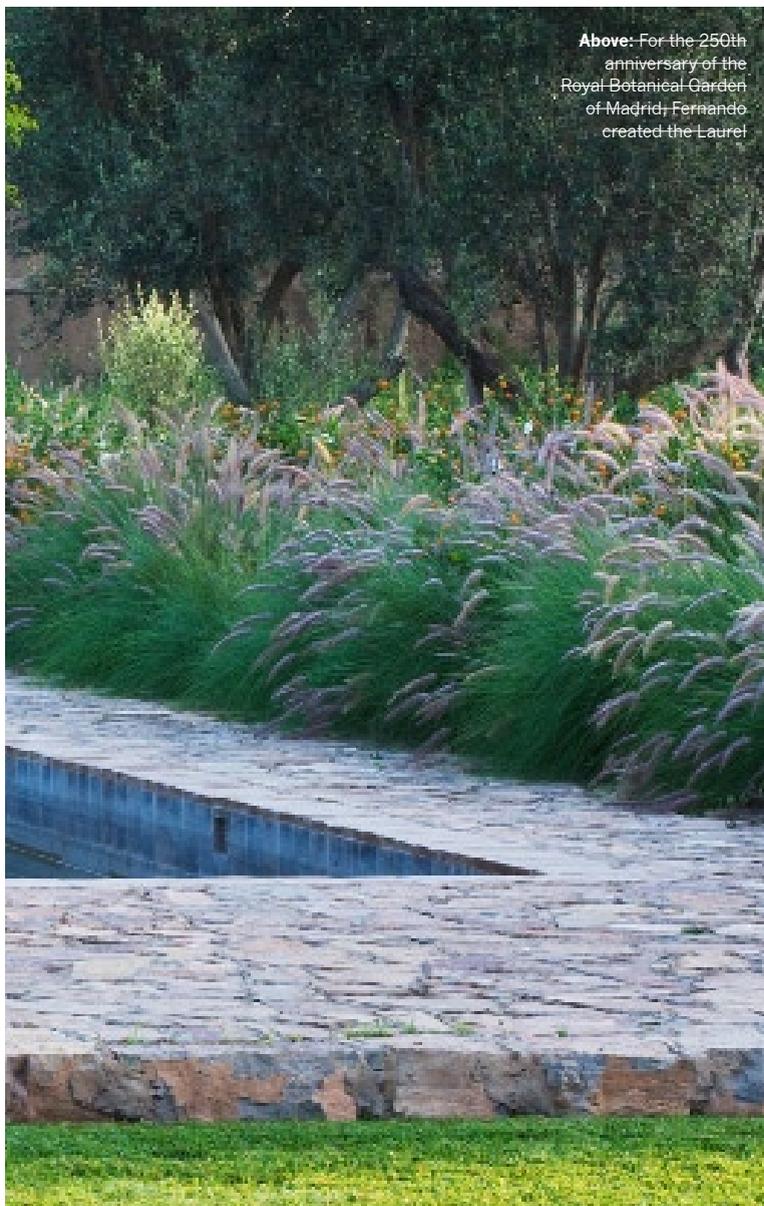
gardeners, which became a centre for young people rejecting the intellectual formalism of the Versailles school, refusing to separate head and hand, design and plants. Patrick Blanc, inventor of vertical wall gardens, was a close associate in the 1990s, both at Chaumont and in Grasse.

Maurières and Ossart first met at one of the many art exhibitions organised by Maurières in Toulouse in 1986. Together, ▶



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➤ they started a specialist nursery and were among the pioneer exhibitors (of whom there were eight) at the first plant fair at Courson. In the 1980s, they launched the potager craze with a huge display of pumpkins supplied by the Château de Saint Jean de Beauregard, still home today of annual fruit and vegetable plant fairs. Here, too, a freer, more exuberant and naturalistic style won the public away from the stiff formalities of Villandry.

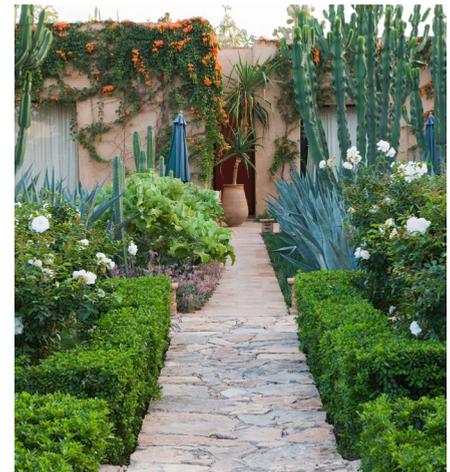
They continued organising shows on themes such as Japanese landscape art and Mediterranean pottery. For the latter, they spent a year touring the Mediterranean rim, constituting a collection housed today in a museum at Saint-Quentin la Poterie in the Uzège, in the heart of the Avignon-Nîmes-Alès triangle. Those years also led them to collect nomadic carpets (Maurières has since published two books on these) and their garden art also began to be deeply marked by Persian and Arabo-Andalusian models. Since 2003, they have been based in Taroudant in Southern Morocco, where they are continuing to work on landscape and garden projects.

Their reworking of the grounds at Dar Al Hossoun – a 120-acre property close to the ancient Taroudant city walls, and now converted into a luxury holiday complex –

illustrates the most important elements of their strikingly original work and picks up on several of their earlier projects.

The first aspect is their treatment of space. A number of their gardens are like three-dimensional carpets; self-contained series of courtyards, often further subdivided. The overall plan may only be glimpsed (if at all) from a roof terrace which also affords the only outside view.

At the Alchemist gardens in Provence, three squares in sequence have black, white and red themes. The intricately symmetrical Noria gardens are carefully planned to line up with distant landscape features. Maurières likes walls with gaps that frame views; Ossart prefers the intimacy of closed and centred spaces. But the symmetries are rarely perfect and adjust to levels and climate conditions. Sequence is enticing, never predictable, always offering new thresholds. Often, there is a symbolic connotation to the meanders and revelations. Among the long rectangles which echo larger spaces are low reflecting pools, usually without plants the better to catch the light. Discrete fountains produce gentle ripples sending reflections on to nearby ceilings. Colour – often used as ochre walls – helps define space and create variation. ➤



➤ In Morocco, much of their work has been with rammed earth architecture, where contours and earth washes are always soft. There are no stark contrasts.

Exuberant planting always accompanies formal geometries. Their basic principle here is fusion: mixing plants with the same needs which come from all over the world. Their unusual associations are on a grand scale and many layered. In Morocco, they have used drought-tolerant mixes of American cacti, South African succulent euphorbias and a wild grass they found in the Sahara. At Al Hossoun, they imagined a sunken garden – like a long, empty swimming pool with gradients, to create a series of micro-climates – where they mix banana trees, papayas, and a wild, white-flowered buddleia they found in Madagascar. They continue to observe plants in remote, wild areas from Burma to Mexico, sometimes working closely with nurseries, often reproducing their favourites themselves. No exotics are ever forced to accept unwelcome conditions.

At the same time, they like cottage plants and cheerfully use marigolds around the trunks of old olive trees, just as they discovered a long flowering variety of canna in local farm gardens for their Paradise gardens which they ran at Cordes-sur-Ciel and donated to the township. They later designed a prairie planting for the roof of an office building in Paris, with views on to the Arc de Triomphe. Their own type of ‘meadow’ planting developed at Chaumont,

and Cordes was the subject of a book on the *Art du tapis de fleurs* which was an inspiration to many French gardeners.

Their love of ancient cultures involves a great respect for vernacular techniques and materials. La Noria, their most recent work in France, is inspired both by Mexican architect Luis Barragan and Islamic courtyards; it blends minimalist architecture with sumptuous plantings, including a rose garden. In Morocco, besides the rammed earth architecture, they use stone paths and pavings made with a technique used for centuries for village threshing floors, and even earlier for Roman roads. They searched mountain sites themselves to get just the right earth for the washes they use on walls. Everything they do is very ‘hands on’ – as Maurières likes to say: “What we like best is doing.”

The gardens of Maurières and Ossart have always been extremely sensuous, and the senses still hold an important place in their design. When they ran the Paradise gardens at Cordes-sur-Ciel, they often cooked for visitors. Scent, from season to season, is a major factor in their choice of plants. Garden management is ecological because it is adapted – as in all vernacular traditions – to the logic of climate and soil. At Al Hossoun, each bathroom gives on to a small private courtyard watered by shower and sink run-off. Sometimes there is a shower head emerging from the foliage itself. These are truly gardens of earthly delights. ■

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Sources

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Paradise Gardens: Landscape Gardening in the Islamic Tradition by Arnaud Maurières and Eric Ossart, I B Tauris & Co Ltd (2001)

Gardens by Eric Ossart & Arnaud Maurières

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- Le Jardin de l’Alchimiste, 13810 EYGALIERES
www.jardin-alchimiste.com
- Jardin des Paradis, 81170 Cordes sur ciel
www.jardindesparadis.eu
- La Noria, 30700 Saint-Quentin-la-Poterie
www.jardin-de-la-noria.com)
- Mediterranean Pottery Museum, Saint-Quentin-la-Poterie
www.gard-provencal.com/an/museums/poterie

Morocco

- Garden Lodge & Spa, Al Hossoun, Taroudant, Morocco
www.alhossoun.com