

In brief

WHAT A terraced olive grove transformed into a pleasure garden

WHERE French Riviera, north of Nice

SIZE Seven acres

SOIL Alkaline and stony

CONDITIONS Low rainfall, hot in summer

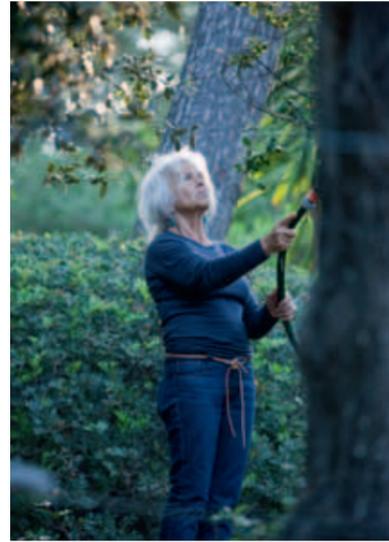
SPECIAL FEATURES Soft minimalist treatment of existing elements; a traditional sculpted landscape becomes a kind of land art

The garden has modern elements but observes the tradition that gardens should blend in with the landscape, using local materials and native plants.

The simple life

With fragrant terraces to explore and shady places to enjoy a meal outdoors, Jacqueline Morabito's garden in the French Riviera is a soothing place to be

WORDS LOUISA JONES PHOTOGRAPHS CLIVE NICHOLS



FAR LEFT The architect Yves Bayard, Jacqueline's late husband, designed the modernist house.

CENTRE Jacqueline says her garden needs "not much care, but a bit every day".

LEFT The planting is designed in soothing tones of green to blend in with the surrounding landscape.

Jacqueline Morabito, a French Riviera native, has achieved worldwide acclaim as a designer of jewellery, dishes, furniture and museum, café and boutique interiors. About 20 years ago, Jacqueline transformed this 16th-century ruin, strongly inspired by the power of its ancient olive groves. Today Jacqueline finds more here than a mere refuge. She says simply: "My garden fills me with joy."

The upper reaches of the property have kept their light woodland of white and green oaks and Aleppo pines. Jacqueline prunes and shapes these trees as the road approaches the entrance to her property, where the drive and pathways are edged with white limestone rocks. These echo the graphic elegance of the ancient drystone terrace walls that sculpt the hillside beyond, each with its own contour. From here, clipped evergreens, bared wood and pale stone create playful rhythms all over the site. A stone circle is laid in rough grass next to a rounded clump of wild terebinth (*Pistachia lentiscus*). A low stacked woodpile makes a ring around a tree (pictured on page 80); everywhere things are arranged in rectangles, circles, cubes and spheres. Jacqueline even uses drip irrigation to create contrasts in summer between circles of

green, watered grass and the naturally seer tones of everything else in the summer heat; otherwise she waters her plants sparingly.

Jacqueline's method of clipping woody plants never produces tight, static, self-contained volumes but soaring, dynamic shapes that flow into their surroundings. The trunks of taller trees contrast with waves of shrubbery. She makes full use of existing terebinths, myrtles and evergreen oaks but has added box and in one place a line of cypresses. Within this the main house beckons – a white cube with extensions – but there's no single route to it. Hidden features, such as her son's woodland cabins, alternate with long perspectives across the hillside.

Minimal clutter

Jacqueline's work is called minimalist because of her emphasis on strong, simple volumes alternating with uncluttered space and clean lines. Her house blends with its setting rather than contrasting with natural growth. Its walls half-enclose a courtyard and shaded dining area. Its whitewash is not bright but milky, catching the light but never glaring, echoing the pale limestone of

walls and paths. A long, narrow pool like a rural watering trough (pictured on pages 76-77) is lined with grey cement so that the water reflects the sky, changing colour from season to season. The rare objects that punctuate house and garden – sculpted wood from a Greek monastery, a marble Roman basin, a wooden goat's head – are mementoes of friends or travel.

Much of the garden's harmony comes from gentle layering of human experience through time, nowhere so present as in the olive trees, cultivated for centuries. Their muted colours and textures set the tone for the garden. The upper surface of olive leaves is, in some weathers, almost black, its undersides silvery white. There is nothing dreary about this subtlety, however. Fragrance is everywhere, even in February when wild violets pepper her terraces. Jacqueline loves the variations of season and weather. Her least favourite season is August – too hot and glaring. For as she says: "This is a garden that lives by light."

Jacqueline does most of the upkeep herself, clipping, planting and taking cuttings. She has trained two gardeners who share her ▶

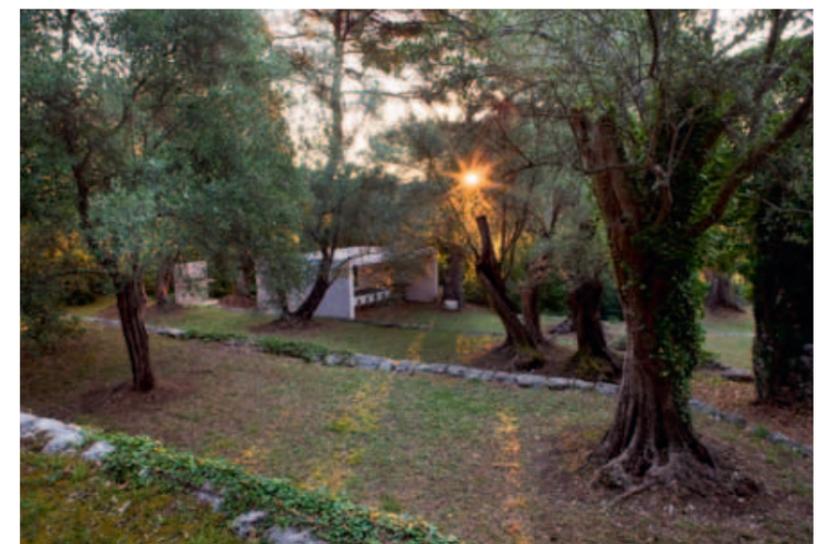
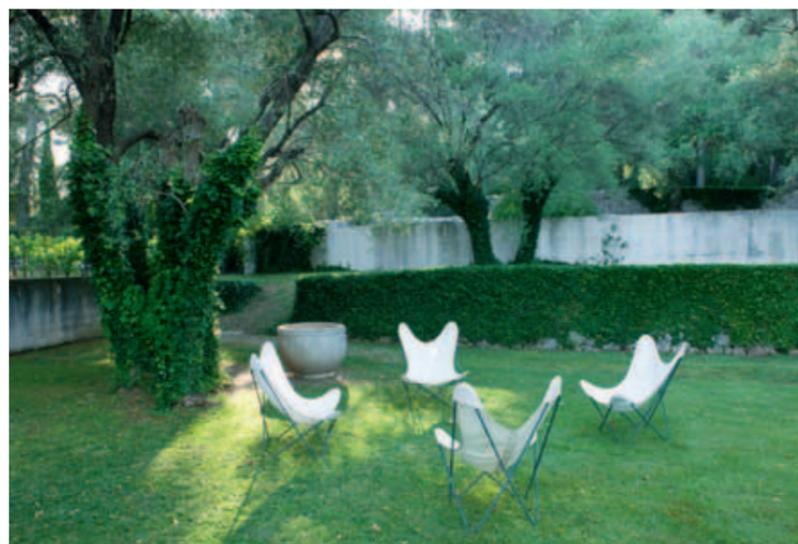
The Mediterranean way

New gardens on the French Riviera often shock because they create artificially flat spaces and use textures and materials that clash with their surroundings. In contrast, Jacqueline Morabito's garden belongs to an older tradition – of establishing a continuity with the landscape by blending into it. Jacqueline makes the most of her garden's rural location, especially in her terraced hillsides, always one of the best landscapes for enjoying both shelter and views. Like farmers for centuries, she collects stones from her own soil to repair drystone walls and establish new paths. For other paths she has invented a new technique, lining them with fallen oak leaves. She loves wild ivy, shaping it as it carpet terraces and climb walls. She likes a mood of deliberate neglect, of orderliness in the midst of spontaneity. It is hard to distinguish what she planted and what comes naturally.

FAR RIGHT Classic butterfly chairs tempt visitors to stop and relax in the green and gold light of a midsummer's evening.

CENTRE Soft domes of box bring a subtle sense of enclosure to the fringes of this lawn.

RIGHT Limestone retaining walls divide the sloping ground into terraces shaded by mature olive trees.





Beyond the pool, Aleppo pines (*Pinus halepensis*) and pencil cypresses (*Cupressus sempervirens* Stricta Group) fill the air with fragrance.

RIGHT A rendered wall contrasts with the rough stone and dark ivy around it.



Almost everything in the garden has a sculptural quality – from low stone walls to the furniture and the clipped shrubs and trees.

▷ enthusiasm, to help. She has taught them her reverence for what she calls “la beauté du geste” (the right move). Often, she feels, just a small, well-timed gesture – clipping or planting – can transform an ordinary place into something sublime.

The key to Jacqueline’s approach is not control, but management. She makes the most of what is already there, in some cases for centuries. Her soft minimalism characterises a whole movement in contemporary Mediterranean landscape art, one that affirms partnership with nature, and millennia of human co-evolution with the land. This includes edible gardening: Jacqueline’s olive trees are productive, to which she adds the fruit of small wild olives that survive among the pines and oaks. They have almost no flesh but they an incomparable flavour. She could, of course, buy excellent oil locally, but she considers that “a garden is a school for patience, and patience is one thing you cannot buy.” Real luxury means being able to wait, not getting everything instantly. Her garden is a similar mix of wild and cultivated, inextricably mixed through layers of time... and patience. □



Outdoor dining

Gardens in the South of France sometimes have outdoor dining terraces to the east for breakfast, west for the aperitif, south for winter lunches and north for summer dinners. Designer Jacqueline Morabito goes much further. While the house walls extend outwards to provide shade and shelter for sitting outdoors, she also plans for maximum mobility in her alfresco eating. She says her great pleasure is to picnic anywhere in the garden at any time, all year round. Her outdoor furniture – even the long table made of pine planks on trestles – is easily taken apart and reassembled. She creates wooden furniture treated with powdered marble, or oxidised oak, for both indoor and outdoor use. She loves to confer beauty on simple, utilitarian objects, just as she transforms ordinary places into something ‘sublime’. Eating all over the garden is for her a kind of exotic travel, a way of discovering and enjoying different angles of vision (standing or seated), a pleasure she loves to share with friends.



A traditional method of storing firewood becomes ruggedly ornamental in Jacqueline’s hands.

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