

In brief

WHAT Landscape garden, mixing formal and wild elements.
WHERE Luberon hills in Provence, France.
SIZE Ten acres.
SOIL Alkaline, stony and poor.
CONDITIONS Cool winters, long dry summers.
SPECIAL FEATURES Laid out by influential garden designer Nicole de Vésian in the 1980s.

Lime trees shade the green domes of clipped plants – trademark of the garden's late designer Nicole de Vésian. Some of her favourite plants for clipping are listed on page 41.

A refuge high in the hills

Set on a ridge overlooking the Luberon hills, the idyllic garden of retired professors Daniel and Michèle is as effortlessly natural as the landscape that surrounds it

WORDS LOUISA JONES PHOTOGRAPHS CLIVE NICHOLS



OPPOSITE PAGE, FAR LEFT Terraces and sitting areas are dotted around the garden; this one is cool and shady on summer mornings.
OPPOSITE PAGE, RIGHT Slender, bent stems of holm oaks (*Quercus ilex*) reflect in the swimming pool.
THIS PAGE, LEFT An opening in the drystone wall leads to the wilder landscape beyond the garden.

Nicole de Vésian, designer of the iconic garden ‘La Louve’ in Provence, loved the Luberon hills, a rugged limestone ridge sheltering picturesque hill towns, grottoes and one of France’s richest wildlife reserves. In the late 1980s, while working on her own garden, she began a small design business. Her first clients were French, a couple of professors taking early retirement after a long stint in the US.

Daniel and Michèle ‘M’ still live and garden year round on this steep slope tucked behind a medieval village. They began by building a Californian ranch-style house on a small plateau, with views overlooking valleys on almost all sides. It has huge picture windows. “Luminosity means a lot to me,” says Michèle, “and we wanted to be surrounded by all this natural beauty.”

Green and white oak and Aleppo pines had been long encroaching on crumbled dry stone terracing that had once supported vineyards and a cherry orchard, now reverted to

meadow land rich with spring flowers. Bits of ancient stonework, including three of the vaulted stone huts locally called *bories*, emerge here and there, much of it blending imperceptibly with natural stone outcrops.

Blending in to the landscape

Vésian was first asked to ‘edit’ the existing landscape – to open up views and frame its best features. She began with the house, “very comfortable to live in,” explains Michèle, “but without much charm.” On Vésian’s advice, a glass front door was put in opposite the picture windows. This creates crossed perspectives indoors connecting with those outside.

Next, on this wide open site, some screening was needed. Vésian designed a stone wall at right angles to the cypress-lined drive to hide the house almost entirely from visitors as they arrive. Michèle remembers with affection Nicole directing the mason:

“She wanted it to look just like the ruined walls nearby, using stone found here and there on the property. But the workman, proud of his skills, wanted it perfect and spanking new. She stood over him and kept getting him to change this stone and that. Now it looks as if it had always been there.”

Beyond this wall you now discover the house rising from layered mounds and globes of clipped greenery, the kind of small-scaled plant tapestry for which Vésian became famous. It looks easy, but imitators find that a fine eye is needed to judge proportions and balance.

Each plant keeps its own character. Many of these species grow wild nearby, creating the kind of dynamic link Vésian loved between pruned and spontaneous shapes. Michèle had already discovered a natural box grove (*Buxus sempervirens*) further down the hill. She still digs up seedlings there for new projects.

Meadows and old trees

To the west and north, where the land slopes steeply down from the house, Vésian’s main task was to thin the oak and pine woodland. Some trees were removed, others rounded to bring out their natural growth habit.

The careful shaping of mature holm oaks, trunks and crowns makes a perfect transition from the tapestries to the valley vistas beyond. As you walk through the landscape, you can touch the bark and look through foliage in dappled light while admiring the shape of another grove against the cliff face beyond. ➤

“The careful shaping of mature holm oaks... makes a perfect transition from the tapestries to the valley vistas beyond”

THIS PAGE, RIGHT The land falls steeply away from the garden on the north side of the house.

THIS PAGE, FAR RIGHT A drive leads from the garden to the village through an avenue of cypresses.

OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT A traditional *borie* near the edge of the grounds was probably once a sheepfold.

OPPOSITE PAGE, FAR RIGHT Holm oak (*Quercus pubescens*), white oak (*Q. alba*) and Aleppo pines (*Pinus halepensis*) fringe the meadows.





“Daniel and Michèle continue working in the Vésian spirit. This is a garden for living, not a museum”

▷ One of Vésian’s great gifts was her ability to combine intimate plantings with middle ground and distant perspectives, all of equal interest, changing as you move but always balanced. Harmonies of volume, muted colours and rough textures, of full and empty space, begin right under your nose (and appeal by their fragrance), then lead the eye and the feet further on. There are many viewpoints, invitations to sit or continue and enjoy fresh angles of vision, to discover new details. The whole site is like a huge, kinetic sculpture.

Vésian never made plans: “I never draw, I never measure,” she said proudly. When it came to thinning the lower woodland, she

simply walked round the property with the owners and tied a string around the trees she wanted felled. Daniel and Michèle remember with some indulgence her tricks for getting their consent. Near the house they had planted a malingering tree where Vésian wanted empty space. Daniel resisted. Vésian presented him with a picture of the tree on which she had written: ‘In memoriam’. He gave in.

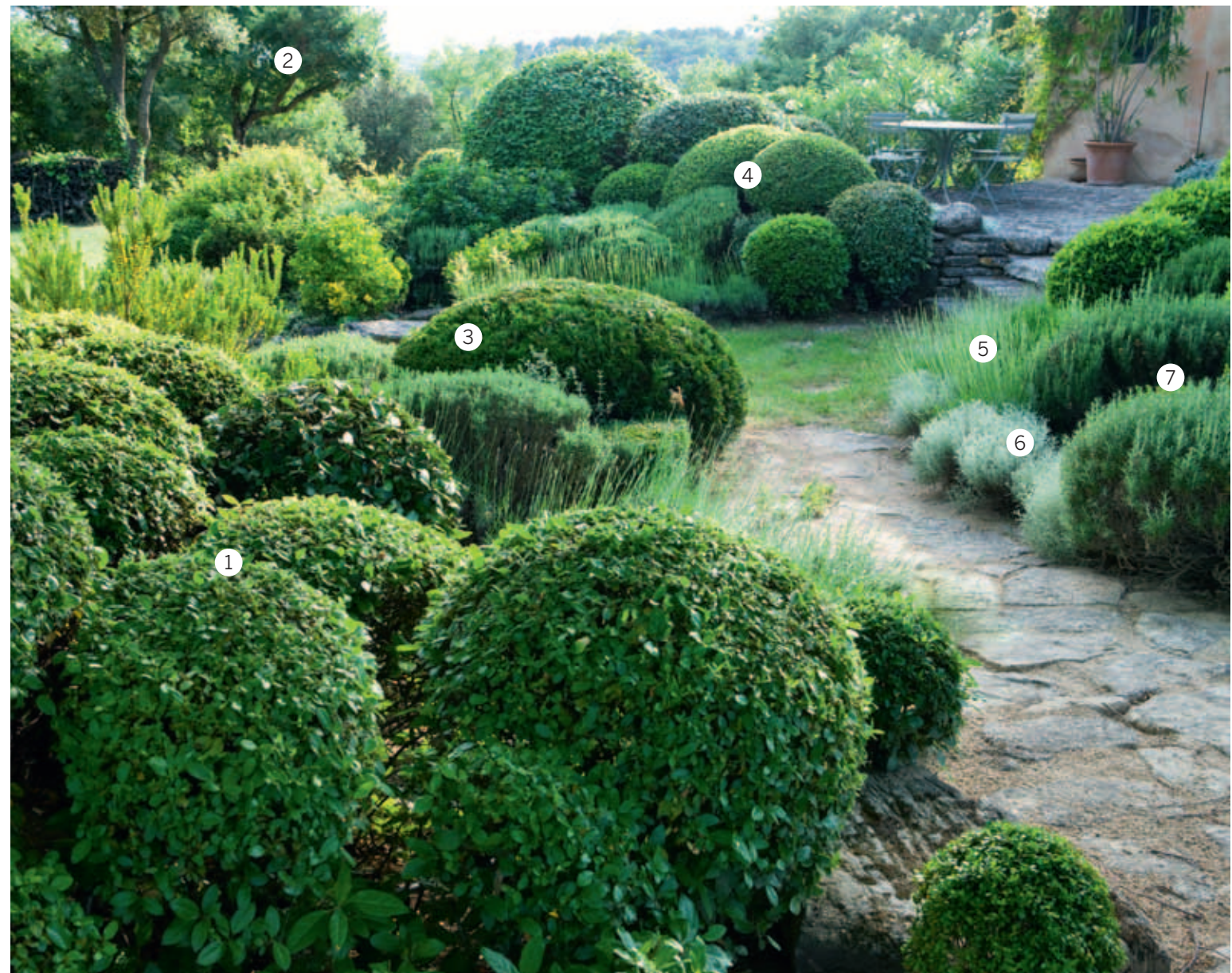
Daniel and Michèle continue working in the Vésian spirit. This is a garden for living, not a museum. He recently cleared a big boulder, leaving only a blanket of wild savory and one sentinel pine. They do little new planting, but Michèle is experimenting with perovskias and shrubby germanders on the north side of the house. They have the occasional help of two gardeners who have an artistic eye and a fine hand for pruning the holm oaks.

Thanks to the good start that Nicole de Vésian provided, they have lived in peace for many years in these old fields and woodland, practicing landscape art on a grand as well as intimate scale. □

TOP LEFT Holm oaks pruned into dramatic shapes help to blend the relative order of the garden into the managed wildness of the landscape beyond. A Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*) softens the appearance of the house.

TOP RIGHT The house lies at the top of a hill, above limestone cliffs and terraces retained with drystone walls, where vineyards and cherry trees once grew.

RIGHT The hills of the Luberon loom on the horizon, above meadows shaded by young Aleppo pines.



10 ‘clippable’ plants

Nicole de Vésian grew ‘shaped’ plants together in a range of textures and colours, from silver to dark green. Here are ten of her favourites

1 *Viburnum tinus*

This common local species, known as laurustinus, is tolerant of drought and poor soil. Tough, medium-sized foliage can be clipped to any size without damage. Hardy.

2 *Quercus ilex*

Holm oak is the defining tree of this landscape, often multi-trunked and wind-bent. It makes natural sculpture alone or in groves, can be clipped into domes and cloud patterns or pollarded to keep it bushy. It’s slow-growing but tough.

3 *Pittosporum tobira* ‘Nana’

This half-hardy New Zealand native is useful for its tough, evergreen foliage. It’s half-hardy (tolerating temperatures down to freezing point). It may be clipped, but has a natural, mounded habit.

4 *Buxus sempervirens*

Common box is another species that grows wild in Provence. It turns rust-coloured in cold winters. Fine-textured foliage can be kept clipped to most sizes or shapes; unclipped it grows up to 4m tall.

5 *Lavandula angustifolia* ‘Hidcote’

This dwarf lavender flowers early and stays compact if clipped after flowering. Prune back as hard as you can without going into old, woody growth.

6 *Santolina chamaecyparissus*

Cotton lavender has scented, silvery foliage that naturally forms a mound. It benefits from clipping twice a year, or it may become leggy and sprawling; parts of it may die back, so it’s best not used in mass plantings. Frost-hardy (down to -5°C).

7 *Rosmarinus officinalis*

Rosemary is a tough, scented plant. Many cultivars are available, often with distinct growing habits. Most need clipping to stay compact.

8 *Teucrium fruticans*

(Not shown.) Silver germander is a small, frost-hardy shrub native to other parts of the Mediterranean. It flowers in winter in shades of blue. Its maximum height is about 1.2m. It’s clippable, but its natural fountain shape complements mounds well.

9 *Convolvulus cneorum*

(Not shown.) A Mediterranean native, silverbush is a low-growing (60 cm), naturally shaped silvery mound, not usually clipped because it fits fitting easily into plant ‘tapestries’ in its natural form.

10 *Elaeagnus x ebbingei*

(Not shown.) Vésian loved the silvery undersides of its leaves (the closest she could find to her beloved beige in plants). Its small flowers give off an intoxicating scent in October. Infinitely adaptable to clipping.