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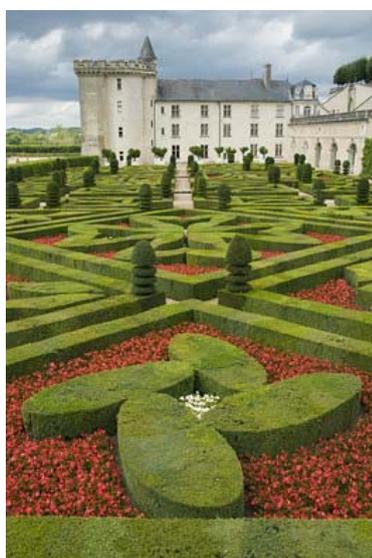
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Gardens of Delight

By LENNOX MORRISON

Paris

Toward the end of his life, King Louis XIV of France was hindered by gout from walking freely through the immense and wondrous gardens he had willed into existence at the Château of Versailles. But that didn't prevent him from dictating, step by step, how visitors were to view them. He prepared at least six different guides, each linked to the season and time of day, so as to ensure the best possible play of light and shadow. For instance, the tour for Marie-Béatrice d'Este, second wife of King James II of England, was designed for July 19 at 6 p.m.



the Hedge Maze Garden at the Château of Villandry
Corbis

Today, the Sun King's perennially awe-inspiring gardens, a 30-minute train ride southeast from Paris, are officially listed as one of 200 or so "jardins remarquables" (notable gardens) by France's Ministry of Culture -- and perhaps the best living guide to them is Alain Baraton.

Known as "The Gardener of Versailles," Mr. Baraton started out at the château as a ticket seller but, thanks to his agricultural school training, he was quickly reassigned to the gardens. Today, he is head gardener for the greater part of the grounds, and he and his wife, Corine, live there in apartments once inhabited by royal favorites, such as the great playwright and actor, Moliere.

On an overcast summer morning, the tall windows of Mr. Baraton's office are thrown open to birdsong, his German shepherd Pym sprawls at his feet. The stone walls are lined with timeworn plans of the gardens through the centuries -- gardens universally recognized as France's finest expression of art and nature, and as writer Lucien Corpechot adjudged in 1937 "the divine shock of perfection."

As the story goes, in 1661, at age 23, Louis XIV visited Vaux-le-Vicomte, the country estate of his finance minister, Nicolas Fouquet, and was outraged by its magnificence. The young monarch immediately commanded the architect, decorators and gardeners who had worked on it to build him a palace of unsurpassable opulence, with grounds to match.

At the time, Versailles was a foul-smelling swampland and the plans for the gardens drawn up by the king's principal gardener, André Le Nôtre, looked impossibly ambitious. But with an absolute monarch impatient for results, thousands of men were set to work; at one point 36,000 laborers were on site. The transformation they wrought appeared almost miraculous.

Today, the geometric gardens immediately in front of the château remain the model for formal gardens in the French style. The rambling grounds beyond, within which nestles the Normandy-inspired hamlet where Marie-Antoinette played at being a dairymaid, are a superlative example of the romantic, landscaped garden.



Gardens at the Château of Versailles
Corbis

Le Nôtre, who masterminded many other famous gardens, remains France's most celebrated gardener. And over the centuries, the men who have tended the living masterpiece of Versailles have found their own way of making their mark.

"We occasionally come across bottles buried by the gardeners who planted them. There's usually a date, a name, sometimes a dedication. I once found a bottle dated 1850, which was very moving," explains Mr. Baraton, who today directs a team of 70 gardeners. As an author of many books on Versailles and on gardening, and with his own radio show on France Inter, the 52-year-old Mr. Baraton reveals the "detective work" involved in restoring the gardens to their original colors. Having spotted a painting of the gardens by 18th-century artist Jean Cotelle depicting red, blue, pink and white in the flower beds of the Grand Trianon, Mr. Baraton raked through ancient archives to find the original seed orders. By comparing these with literary accounts of the period, he was able to double check which varieties were brought to flower.

His latest book, "Walks in the Gardens of Versailles," was published in June by Art Lys in English: His insider's tip is to view castle and gardens "back to front" from the vantage point of L'Etoile Royale, a star-shaped meeting of paths at the far end of the Grand Canal.

"It's a very beautiful and astonishing spot," Mr. Baraton says. "You're surrounded by nature and yet you see the whole castle laid out in front of you just as the King imagined it."



Alain Baraton at Versailles

Sam Thekkethil



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William Daniels for The Wall Street Journal Europe

A pavilion in the gardens of Versailles

To uncover more about France's outstanding gardens, [head to the Tuileries Gardens in Paris](#). Burrowed within the 17th-century stone walls of a former royal guard house is the Librairie des Jardins, the country's foremost horticultural bookshop.

On a recent blazing summer afternoon, in the cool vault of her underground office, bookshop director Francoise Simon sparks with enthusiasm about her stock of more than 4,000 books and her polyglot, horticulturally savvy staff.

"We're always happy to answer queries from the public," she says. "And we also act as a point of connection between gardeners and publishers and authors. Books have come into being out of ideas first discussed here."

Asked to name her best-loved gardens, Ms. Simon produces a long, handwritten list. Among her favorites is the sumptuous Château de Chantilly, a 45-minute drive north of Paris, where Le Nôtre -- before being set to work at Versailles -- created a masterpiece in leaf and flower for Louis II de Bourbon Condé.

"Le Nôtre liked to work with light, with sunset and sunrise," she says. "You can see that very clearly at Chantilly. The gardens are very elegant, a la française, and complete harmony reigns between château and gardens."

Another of Ms. Simon's choices is the entire town of Cahors in Lot, in southwestern France, five-and-a-half hours' drive from Paris. In keeping with the architecture of the oldest quarter, the streets have been planted with 30 gardens on a medieval theme. A walking tour, called "The Secret Gardens of Cahors," has won a listing from the Ministry of Culture.

Designed by landscape gardener Patrick Charoy, director of the town's nature, cities and gardens department, and opened in 2002, the tour can be followed year-round with a free map from the tourist office on Place François Mitterrand or [by looking out for the trail of bronze acanthus leaves set in the pavement](#).

While all the gardens are medieval in atmosphere, some are also historically authentic. "I searched through ancient manuscripts to find out what was being planted at the time. The result is that, for instance, in the Monk's Vegetable Garden you'll see fennel, nettles, arugula, marigolds and orache -- an early variety of spinach -- but not tomatoes, aubergines, peppers and sweetcorn, which only came to Europe after Christopher Columbus's voyages to America," Mr. Charoy says.

Ms. Simon adds, "Thanks to the flowers and plants, the old buildings really come alive. It's truly innovative. Medieval and yet at the same time contemporary."

One of the delights in Cahors, she says, is the tiny scale of some gardens. "A large garden has the power to impress us but a small garden can touch our emotions. I need to visit both types of garden."

Her sentiments are shared by Christian Maillard, secretary of the Conservatoire des Jardins et Paysages, France's national association to protect and promote gardens and landscapes. "You must be able to experience an emotion," he says. "When I visit a garden what remains with me afterward are the special moments; a lawn of squirrels, a wisp of mist, a special effect of the light, a meeting with the owner who shares his memories.

"A garden is like an outside room and a room fascinates us not when we discover it all at once but when we let ourselves be surprised by it, gradually," continues Mr. Maillard, co-author of the guidebook "Parcs et Jardins en France," published by Rivages in 2008.

He recommends the [Jardins de l'Imaginaire \(Gardens of the Imagination\) in Terrasson-Lavilledieu in the Dordogne](#), about five hours' drive south of Paris. Opened in 1996, the six-hectare site features a dedicated water garden but also makes use of water throughout to express the underlying theme: the history of mankind. The beauty of reflections in water is perhaps best viewed along the sinuous banks of the River Loire, famously rich in fairytale châteaux.



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A swirl of flowers in Versailles.

"Water is used to symbolize the passage of time, which sometimes moves as swiftly as a torrent and sometimes as regularly as a great river. As you explore the gardens you come upon fountains and water jets, waterfalls and pools," Mr. Maillard says.

The presence of water, he adds, is a crucial element in any garden. "The sound of water and the reflections within it bring a sense of peacefulness and yet at the same time they bring life."

Among the enchanting gardens described in her guidebook "Jardins des bords de Loire" ("Gardens on the Banks of the Loire"), published in 2005 by Editions Ouest-France, award-winning author and horticultural expert Lucienne Deschamps recommends [Château de Villandry in Indre-et-Loire](#). Completed in the 1530s, it is the last of the large châteaux to be built in the Loire Valley in Renaissance style.

"It's absolutely typical of a Renaissance garden with a very regular design, and there are raised terraces so that the gardens can be viewed from above," Ms. Deschamps says. "Part of the specific character of Villandry is that vegetables are used as a decorative element. For instance, artichokes, Swiss chard, cabbages. The plantings change every year according to the colors and foliage desired."

Back at Versailles, Mr. Baraton tells a story about Le Nôtre, the landscape gardener who basked permanently in his monarch's favor, an unusual occurrence at Louis XIV's court. "When Le Nôtre was an old man it was the king himself who pushed him through the gardens in a wheelchair," Mr. Baraton says.

If the Sun King could somehow revisit the gardens today, would they meet with His Majesty's approval?

"He'd be very happy with the work of the gardeners. He wouldn't see the same tools as were used in his day but he would see that the spirit of the gardeners remains the same."

—Lennox Morrison is a writer based in Paris

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