



LORD OF THE GREEN

LOUIS BENECH, FRANCE'S MASTER GARDEN DESIGNER, CONJURES A BOLD AND BEAUTIFUL FUTURE WHILE REMAINING LOYAL TO THE BEST TRADITIONS OF THE PAST IN LANDSCAPES ALL OVER THE WORLD. **BY PATRICK ROGERS**

It stands to reason that a man who dedicates his life to gardening would also be a lover of plants. But the way Louis Benech handles them—the way he talks about plants, places them, and plays with them—reveals a passion for botany that runs deeper. “I’m mad about plants.

They’re never far from my mind,” says Benech, who, before gaining fame as one of the world’s great landscape designers, worked and studied for three years in the greenhouses of England’s famous Hillier nursery. There, to the surprise of his more scientifically minded colleagues,

the law-school graduate regularly scored highest on the weekly plant-identification quizzes, he says. “The others were sort of amazed. That’s kind of a tricky thing, and yet I could do it more or less blind.”

Nearly three decades have passed since then, during which Benech has created landscapes on five continents, both public commissions and private domains for clients with names like Guinness and Saint Laurent and Grimaldi. His latest, unveiled in Paris this summer when the Hôtel de Crillon emerged from a four-year refurbishment, is a pair of tiny urban oases tucked into dark courtyards in the heart of the city. “They’re spaces that get three minutes of sun a day, in June, at lunchtime,” jokes Benech, slightly ruffled in the sturdy jacket of an English outdoorsman and trowsers the color of the Mediterranean Sea.

The result is a lush take on a classic French orangery in the hotel’s Cour d’Honneur, with camellia-filled oak tubs copied from originals at Versailles and walls covered in *Trachelospermum jasminoides*, a climber with a fresh green leaf and fragrant blossoms in summer. Murmuring bronze water fountains by Canadian sculptor Marie Khouri add a playful ▶



The garden of the National Archives in Paris, designed by Benech in 2011.



A boxwood hedge in the garden of a client in Saint-Tropez, 1995.



Blooming perennials at the Château de Villandry, in the Loire Valley.

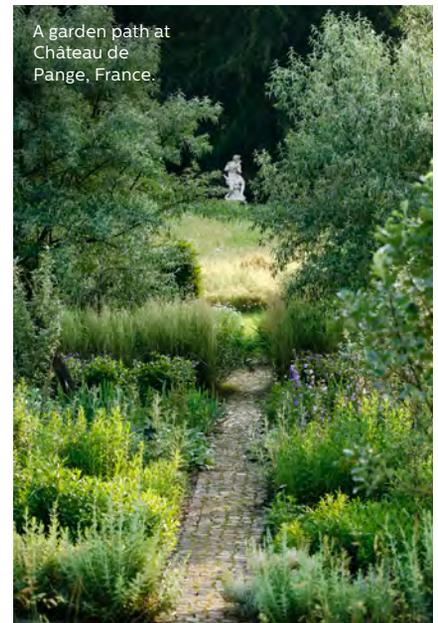


Benech's leafy Cour Gabriel at the Hôtel de Crillon in Paris.

touch: They're shaped like heads of cabbage that have been prized open by a child. In an adjacent courtyard, on the private terrace of a suite named in honor of Marie Antoinette (who reportedly took music lessons in the building), wicker

planters evoke the gardens of the Trianon, spilling over with a pink-blooming mix of bleeding heart, anemone, African *Diascia*, and flowering chive that Benech describes as "Sofia Coppola-esque."

Benech has avoided being pegged with a signature style, although his gardens are often admired for combining the straight lines and clipped geometries of French formalism with overgrown English romanticism. His breakthrough came in 1990 when, with fellow gardener Pascal Cribier and architect François Roubaud, he rejuvenated the Tuileries Garden in Paris, peeling away a century of overgrowth to restore sight lines to the Champs-Élysées and cheekily planting rows of yellow- and orange-flowering fennel. A quarter of a century later, he created the first new garden at Versailles in more than 100 years, called the Water Theater grove—a contemporary design so inventive and harmonious that it



A garden path at Château de Pange, France.

seamlessly takes its place in a landscape considered to be a masterpiece. "I could make my little statement," he explains, "but for me, concept is less important than context."

The challenge of his profession, says Benech, is to create spaces that are alive and beautiful today and will remain so tomorrow. "You think a garden exists because of one person with a big idea," he says humbly. "Not really. It exists because of the people who look after it every day, all year long, year after year." Spoken like a true gardener. ■



Watercolor sketch of the Water Theater grove at Versailles, 2014.