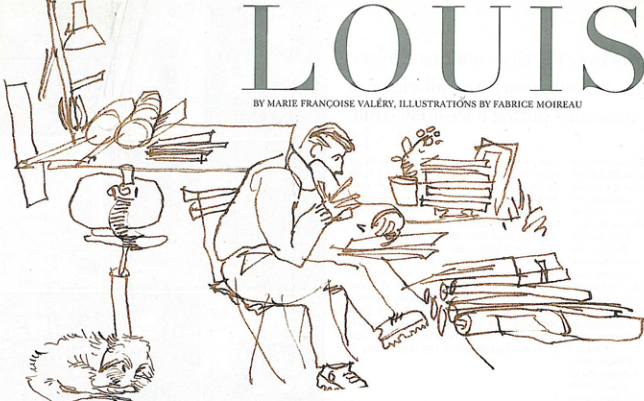


LOUIS BENECH

BY MARIE FRANÇOISE VALÉRY, ILLUSTRATIONS BY FABRICE MOIREAU



Maison & Jardin asked Louis Benech to create a "Garden for Contemplating the Moon", a fleeting event that may be admired from May 12 to 15 at L'Art du Jardin in the Parc de Saint-Cloud. Who is Louis Benech? How did he go about creating this garden? Here are his answers to these questions. Our dialogue with Louis Benech will continue in our April and May issues. And of course you have an important rendezvous at Parc de Saint Cloud in the out skirts of Paris. It will remain open in the evenings during this event. Our garden of Eden will be aglow thanks to the patronage of Electricité de France, a sponsor of this harbinger of spring.

How did this idea come about? From a trip to a lunar garden in England. Françoise Labro, editor-in-chief at *Maison & Jardin*, was seduced by a bit of heaven a friend of her's dreamed up. The conception revolved the moon and its earthy significance. The garden was planted with pale flowers and with foliage. Its architecture echoed the theme of roundness. Louis Benech was already familiar with the subject. Françoise Labro, an ardent admirer of Benech's style, taste and lyricism, asked him to tackle the project.

Who is Louis Benech? A professional landscape architect with the dedication of an ardent enthusiast. How do you define enthusiasm? According to the dictionary, "One who gives himself completely to whatever engages his interest, who cultivates an art for his own enjoyment." He accepts the noble and the pejorative side—both the advantages and the disadvantages—that go with this approach. "I feel very much like a jack-of-all-trades," he says. "I am not reassuring. I respect a garden's rhythm and I don't like to be rushed."

What does he do first? "I remain silent. I

listen to the place and the people. When it comes to design, there is no general rule. Everything is special. Sometimes you arrive with a fine set of principles, and you realize that they just don't apply. What I like best is this give-and-take relationship with places and people. Quite apart from the way you perceive a space, you want the garden to tell a story. And you can only make this happen if there is a dialogue of sorts between it and the owners. The better you get to know people, the better you understand them, the better the garden will be. A case in point, for the *Domaine de la Rivière* I created a shamrock design because the owners are Irish. This may seem incidental, but a leitmotif contributed to the creation of a structure to build on. There are some places where you just make a cosy garden, the same way you would group furniture around a fireplace. But I prefer to tell a story. Place dictates everything. In Normandy, at the *Manoir de la Plesse*, I created a country garden adapted to the style of the house and the activities of the farm. I took down walls and made a ha-ha in order to better integrate the garden with its surroundings. At the *Prieuré Saint-Michel* in the Auge



AT BOIS HINOUST, THERE WAS ALREADY A GARDEN WHEN LOUIS BENECH STEPPED IN.

Louis Benech closed the swimming pool and opened up the perspective with box hedging. The main pathway is flanked by mixed borders, ending in an iron gate. 1. Overview of the different garden areas. 2. Mixed borders backed by a hedge near the moat. Louis Benech created four spaces. A color scheme: white, white and purple, pale yellow, dark yellow, sets the tone for each. Here, clematis is combined with spirea. 3. There is a tightly drawn passage that threads its way through sculptural yews to the house. 4. Mixed borders composed of bushes and annuals hug garden walls covered in espalier-trained pear trees. 5. A visitor gets a first glimpse of the house through a wall of magnificent pruned yews. 6. The house is surrounded by a moat. 'Francis E. Lester' roses soften the edges of walls. Flat-topped yews lead to the drawbridge. 7. Close-up of mixed borders composed of sage, *Allium giganteum* and campanula planted at the foot of a *Buddleia alternifolia*.



L'ART DU JARDIN





region, I planted the rose garden hedges against the chapel and I used a walnut tree as a focal point, deliberately situating it off-center to avoid giving the perspective the geometrical perfection of a slide rule.

Benech remains silent, he listens, and then what? "I think about it. It takes shape slowly in my mind. I spend whole days mulling it over. And I am always surprised when a garden springs forth. I want to express myself in a concrete. A garden is hospitable. I don't like to talk about poetics, but a garden is fatally poetic because it is a vehicle for beautiful things. No beautiful garden exists that hasn't been built," he goes on. "I have my own special tastes in landscape architecture that have probably been inherited from, for example, Russell Page. He developed a formalism with charm. Russell Page was never dry. He was rigorous, sometimes guided by logic alone. He worked within rigid structures, but he also knew how to express himself in an informal fashion and he mastered space brilliantly. For Belgium's Belder Arboretum he created a network of ponds and classified plants by species, which is totally artificial; but when you go there it flows naturally. The hand of man is not noticeable. Page created places that are timeless, that you really can't put a date on." Louis Benech loves plants. He listens to their wants; pays attention to their needs. His compositions

AT THE DOMAINE DE LA RIVIERE,

Louis Benech created a shamrock design for a woodland undergrowth garden, adding a lunar and a solar garden to it. He swathed the half-beam manor house with climbing vines and waded the flower borders. 1. A 'White Cloud' rose is allied with a 'Hagley Hybrid' clematis. At its base, *Romneya Coulteri*, *Philomis italica* and valerians. 2. A beechwood kiosk, complete with ribbing, doors and windows, was placed at one end of the principal axis as a focal point. The plants

were trained over a structure made of concrete reinforcing rods.

3. An oak leaf bridge-bench designed by Louis Benech spans La Calonne, linking the clover and flower gardens.



full of charm. "I love all plants. There are some I prefer not to see mixed with others. As a general rule, you have to respect things that seem to go together naturally because they have similar requirements. You can put a rhododendron with a hydrangea, but not with lavender. The art of gardening consists in creating dissonance. Dissonance that rings true. A cedar is not a watercourse tree, but a cedar planted on the banks of a pond can be sublime. A garden is a rifice. And even though nature may be my source of inspiration, I am not capable of copying it. I don't even want to. I simply transcribe it. I like a natural look to things, a feeling of natural facility, ease and lightness."

What about color? "I don't have any set opinion. I love colors that create a dynamic that push against or pull toward each other. Green is a linking element that is not often given the attention it deserves."

What is a beautiful garden? "That's a tough question. For a garden to be beautiful, it has to be loved. The important thing is daily attention. Otherwise it will all very quickly go into a decline."

Louis Benech is a hands-on landscape architect and gardener. And even when he accepts a commission from the city of he digs in and gets his hands dirty is he an amateur? Indeed, but in the very best and fullest sense of the word. □

AT LA PLESSE MANOR, right-hand page,

1. The central pathway of the priory garden is underscored by spherical yews, cypress, the White Garden. 2. The White Garden against a backdrop of a hedge of young yews. There is a view of the countryside through the trellises. Here, climbing roses, 'Madame Alfred Carrière', are planted with 'Marie Boisselot' clematis. 3. Close-up of a scene in the White Garden: in the foreground *Hydrangea arborescens*, then *Aruncus sylvester*, in the central area and, behind, *Crambe cordifolia*.

THE PRIEURÉ SAINT-MICHEL gardens near Vimoutiers in Normandy (4), are open to the public (telephone: +33.1.33.36.15.16). The rose garden is divided into plots by color and planted with Delbard roses.



The gardens of La Plesse Manor and the Prieuré Saint-Michel open onto the countryside.

