

Respecting History

At the Château de Pange in north-east France, Louis Benech has created a garden in perfect harmony with its site and history.

Text by Claire Masset Photographs by Eric Sander

Tucked away in a little-known region of north-east France, the gardens of the Château de Pange have recently undergone a quiet transformation. By respecting the site and listening to its owners, Roland and Edith de Pange, international garden designer Louis Benech has created a garden that blends many layers of history, while also being highly original.

The commune of Pange is situated in the department of the Moselle, which itself lies within the better-known and larger region of Lorraine. It is a mere 30-minute (18km or 11 mile) drive from the attractive town of Metz. Once in Pange, visitors may wonder if they have got the right place: nothing in the village indicates the presence of such an impressive house and garden.

Once you have parked, understated entrance gates lead into a gloomy barn from which you emerge to view the central part of the garden: a huge green carpet of grass that instils a sense of theatricality and recalls the French *tapis verts* of the 17th century.

Within this area (see plan on page 24) are wild-flower meadows and two garden ‘rooms’, the most striking of which is the *chambre d’azur et d’argent* (blue and silver room) echoing the colours of the Pange family’s coat of

arms. Here, long borders edged with narrow paths and framed by elegant silver-leaved willows offer striking vistas and dramatic views of the house and fields beyond. Diagonally opposite is a contrasting ‘dark garden’ with shade-loving plants, such as *Daphne laureola philippi*, *Danae racemosa* and *Cephalotaxus harringtonia*.

In the centre of the *tapis vert* is a calm, reflective pool, and at its end a *chambre des houx* (holly room) houses 19th-century statues of Pan and Flora surrounded by a superb butterfly-shaped hedge of common holly (*Ilex aquifolium*). White willows (*Salix alba*) create an almost shimmering backdrop.

Directly in front of the house, another *tapis vert* now graces the original *cour d’honneur* (entrance court). Punctuated by topiarized yew pyramids and borders of *Miscanthus sinensis* and *Iris pseudacorus*, the effect is both sculptural and minimal – a 21st-century interpretation of an 18th-century entrance court, which would have been gravelled or paved.

To one side of the house, an *allée* of cherry trees (another modern take on a French classic) is underplanted with poppies, daisies and other wild flowers. The bucolic background is of fields and rolling hills, all part of the 30ha



Above: A path framed by willows leads the eye towards a romantic 19th-century statue of Pan.

Left: The view of the Château de Pange from the reflective pool and wild-flower meadows.



Below: Large topiarized yews and graceful grasses (*Miscanthus sinensis*) create a striking contrast.

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(74-acre) Pange estate. This *allée* reaches towards the quietly meandering Nied River and beyond to the Bois de Pange with its majestic beeches and 300-year-old oak trees.

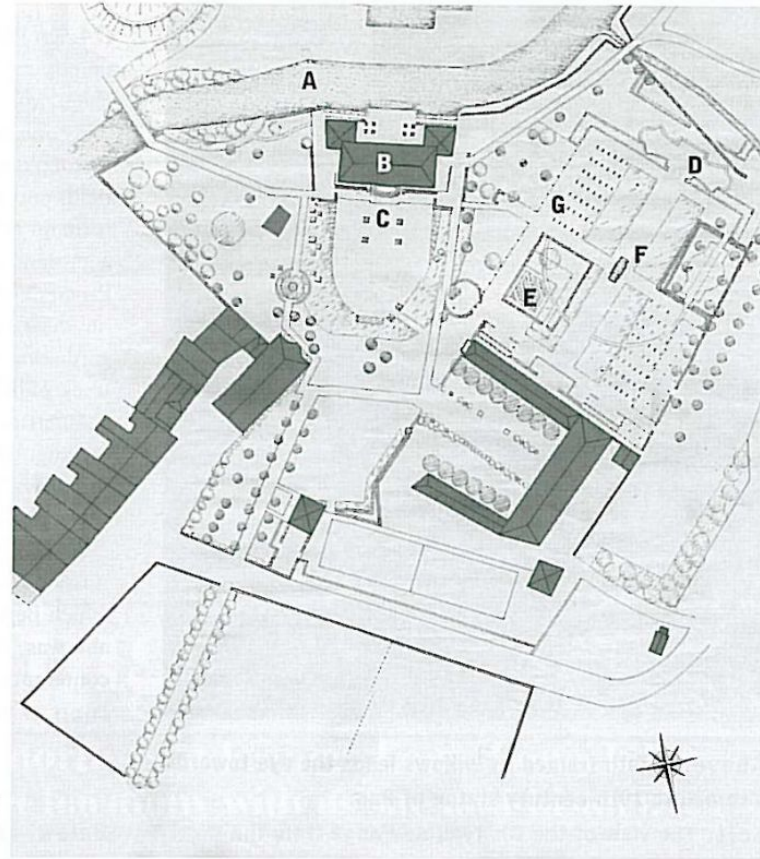
As one walks around, certain key features appear. Throughout the garden, ‘nature’ is ever present. The river, fields and woodland, with the scattered ancient trees, form an intrinsic part of the design. “The countryside in a garden, a garden in the countryside,” is how Roland de Pange describes it. New elements, despite being clearly ‘modern’, are understated and offer subtle echoes of past gardening styles and eras, such as the *allée* of cherry trees. While the general structure of the design is geometric, with straight paths and round, square or rectangular borders, the planting itself is far from formal: meadows, fruit trees and masses of willows add fluidity while also increasing the rural theme.

But how did this unusual garden come to be created? A brief look at Pange’s history reveals a rich heritage, of which Benech was aware when designing the garden. His aim was “to blend the classicism of the chateau with a contemporary landscape design while respecting the layers of history”.

Appearances are deceptive and the 18th-century château belies the site's more ancient past. Built in 1720 by Jean-Baptiste Thomas de Pange, the graceful, honey-coloured building (a listed *Monument historique* since 1990) was originally located on a small horseshoe-shaped island, surrounded by the Nied River, where a medieval fortress once stood. Some medieval elements still exist, such as the huge barn (now the entrance to the gardens), which experts are currently trying to date.

One can trace the history of Pange's garden as far back as the 18th century, when a formal garden across the river was planned. The design, however, was never executed due to the yearly flooding of this area. A second plan, again never carried out, shows another formal garden to one side of the château, with formal *allées* and a *salle de verdure* (green room) in the shape of a butterfly – the inspiration for Benech's 'holly room'.

Right: Plan of the garden with key features: A: river Nied; B: château; C: *cour d'honneur*; D: holly room; E: blue and silver room; F: pond; G: cherry tree *allée*.



Below: Beyond the *allée* of cherry trees lie wild-flower meadows, cow-peppered fields and gently rolling countryside.



Above: This subtle tapestry of shapes and tones includes *Rosa 'Ballerina'* and *Fagus sylvatica 'Dawyck Gold'*.

In the 19th century, any gardens that may have existed at Pange were transformed into a *jardin à l'anglaise* believed to have been designed by the famous landscape gardener Paul de Lavenne, Comte de Choulot (see *HGR* 19, page 29) – and indeed Choulot lists the Marquis de Pange as one of his clients in his book, *L'Art des jardins*.

During the Second World War and for a time after, Pange was occupied in turn by Germans, Americans and Canadians. For 30 years, from 1947, the property became a children's home and the garden their vast playground. After this closed, the château was finally returned to its owner, the Marquis de Pange, who would have sold it were it not for the determination of his son, Roland.

When the Marquis showed the property to his daughter-in-law, Edith, in 1975, he warned her: "This is the most sinister place in the world." Undeterred, the twenty-something couple moved from Paris to the village of Pange, with a view to bringing the family seat back to life. "I have never felt like the owner of Pange, but simply the trustee of a common heritage," says Roland de Pange. This why in 1984, as soon as the ground-floor was restored and the first-floor transformed into a family home, he decided to open the château to visitors.

Then, in 1998, a consultation between the owners and the Conseil Général de la Moselle led to a project, worth 6 million French francs, to redesign the gardens. (The venture was part of the *Jardins sans Limites* network; see

page 27 for more information.) A competition was launched to select the designer and Benech was chosen.

Self-confessed gardening novices, Roland and Edith de Pange showed a degree of courage when they took on the project. But they trusted the vision of Benech, who "immediately understood that we wanted the garden to merge into the landscape" and "saw that the most important thing here is not the castle, it is the view. He has made the most of the countryside, which comes across the garden like a wave," explains Roland.

It is perhaps fitting then, that Louis Benech describes himself as an interpreter: he listens to the landscape and translates the ideas of its inhabitants. "I aim to design gardens that the owners can 'reclaim' as their own, in harmony with their history and their own perception of the space."

Benech's respect for 'people and place' may explain why he is one of the world's most sought-after garden designers. Over the past 20 years, he has created (or re-created) over 200 parks and gardens in such diverse places as Korea, Canada, Panama, the United States, Greece, Russia and Morocco. Most famously, he worked on the restoration of the Tuileries Gardens and redesigned the Trianon Palace gardens at Versailles. "I adore working with historic sites," he says.

Benech is unashamedly in love with his work and claims: "Gardening is the most beautiful job in the

world.” This is why, after studying law (“to satisfy my father”), he crossed the Channel to take up an apprenticeship at the famous Sir Harold Hillier Gardens in Hampshire. After three years there, during which he gained a vast horticultural knowledge from the garden’s 42,000 or so plants, he returned to work in France. In 1990, just five years after completing his training in the UK, he won, with Pascal Cribier and François Roubaud, the much-contested competition to restore the famous Tuileries Gardens in Paris.

A few key ideas capture the essence of his work: simplicity, a respect for the site and its history (and also, importantly, for its future), and a personal sense of beauty. “I like to create gardens that have a simple, almost immediate beauty,” he says. “What is difficult is hiding the work involved in creating results which look so free and spontaneous.”

At Pange, this concept expresses itself in wild-flower meadows, fruit-tree *allées*, green carpets and paths. Each of these simple elements helps either frame a view or lead the eye. Pange is, in many ways, a very ‘painterly’ garden – a feature which harks back to English 18th-century landscaped gardens, such as Stowe or Rousham, with their ‘theatrical’ scenes.

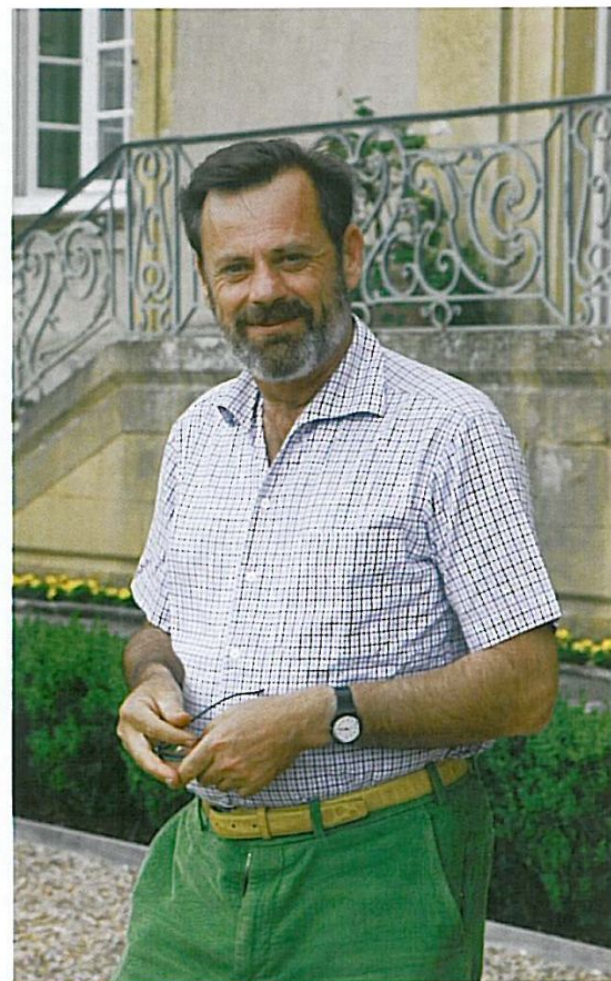
This theme is also found in Roland and Edith de Pange’s passion for acting. They hold private performances in the château and plan one day to make them public and out-of-doors. As Benech explains: “Their love for the theatre had a bearing on my design and led to my inclusion of large open spaces.”

Benech is a masterful *metteur-en-scène* (as the French call stage directors). His vision is of a particular beauty, one that is soft and subtle. “I want to give pleasure to visitors; for this reason I aim to create soft and peaceful gardens.” So it is hardly surprising that the dominant colour at Pange is green, the most relaxing colour of all. Deep-green woods are the perfect backdrop for grey-green willows; dark-green yews contrast with the soft greens of *Miscanthus sinensis*.

Beauty is sometimes only skin-deep, but this particular one has been inspired by a respect for nature. He aims to create gardens that will last, which implies a knowledge of the site’s eco-system. “A garden,” he says, “must never become a burden for the gardener.”

Benech was careful to choose weather-proof varieties – essential in an area which can experience highs of 35°C in the summer and lows of -25°C in winter. The meadows are bursting with hardy, indigenous flowers and, on a site prone to flooding and close to a river, moisture-loving willows are an ideal choice.

While the new design respects many of the ancient trees, some elements suggest older features. The band of *Miscanthus* refers to the siting of the ancient moat; the shape of the holly room was inspired by one of the 18th-



Above: Louis Benech outside the Château de Pange.

century plans and in the *cour d’honneur* the new *cercle des poètes* (poets’ circle) is situated directly opposite an older paved circle with an ancient beech tree at its centre. These touches highlight Benech’s thorough research.

Benech’s work here may be over, but Roland and Edith de Pange make sure the site remains both appealing and interesting. They act as lively guides to the gardens and château, offering a very personal welcome (and free drink!) to all visitors. Edith is currently writing a book on the family and has plans for the garden: she would like to develop it further and make use of the willows to create basketry. One of their sons is responsible for the mighty task of cutting all the hedges, while two more gardeners look after the garden and manage the estate’s woodland.

Five years after it opened to the public, the garden has matured beautifully and attracts more visitors each year. “They sit down, contemplate and enjoy: a clear sign that this garden is a success,” concludes Roland.

The garden at Pange is open between 1 May and 31 October (10am-12 noon; 2-6pm). Please note that it is closed on Mondays. For details telephone +33 (0)3 87 64 04 41, or visit www.chateaudepange.fr

Breaking Boundaries

The European project called *Jardins sans Limites* (also known as *Gärten ohne Grenzen*, or Gardens without Limits) brings together newly-created gardens in the borderland area of Saarland (Germany), Moselle (France) and Luxembourg.

Sponsored by the European Regional Development Fund, the project has given gardeners the chance to create new designs, as well as encouraging job creation and developing tourism in a little-visited region.

Although the area has a rich history (not least in the recent past, as one of the most bloody battlegrounds of the First World War), it has not – until recently – been known for its gardens. And yet, at the beginning of the 20th century, under the influence of the Ecole de Nancy, the Lorraine region (of which the *département* of the Moselle is part) was a melting pot of famous horticulturalists, including Victor Lemoine, François Félix Crousse and the Simon Louis brothers. The *Jardins sans Limites* network continues this tradition, while at the same time looking to the future.

To belong to the network, gardens must fulfil a number of criteria. Above all, they must combine botanical and design interest with an educational agenda. Even if a garden is part of a heritage site, only its intrinsic quality as a garden determines its inclusion. It must be attractive to tourists in a unique way – independently from the attractiveness of the site in which it is set.

In conformity with the charter, each garden must be looked after by qualified gardeners who work for the

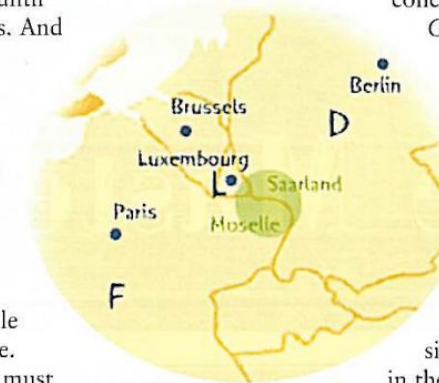
network and undergo regular training. This also helps the different sites share knowledge and expertise.

Jardins sans Limites was the brain-child of Hella Kreiselmeier, a keen gardener and technical advisor at the CEB (*Christliche Erwachsenenbildung Fortbildungswerk*), an organisation which helps to train people to work. In 1997, she launched the idea of a network of thematic gardens. In her search for partners, she contacted the *Conseil Général de la Moselle*. The council’s president, Philippe Leroy, asked the consulting firm *Prospective et Patrimoine* to conduct a feasibility study. The

conclusions were positive, and the *Conseil Général de la Moselle* decided to become involved in 1998. At the same time, the European Union agreed to co-finance the project. Other financial partners included the Ministry for Finance in the Saarland and the *Bundesanstalt für Arbeit* (German Federal Institute for Employment).

At the beginning of 1999, the *Conseil Général de la Moselle* contacted the managers of ten heritage sites, who had already expressed an interest in the project. The Château de Pange was one of the first sites to start work on its garden. In spring 1999, the first of the network’s gardens, the Baroque Gardens in Perl in Germany, opened its doors. In spring 2006 there were 19 gardens in the network; now there are 26 and three more are currently being designed.

For more information and details of all the gardens within the network, telephone +33 (0)3 87 37 57 80 or see www.jardins-sans-limites.com



Three other gardens in the *Jardins sans Limites* network



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