



# Louis Benech: The Global Gardener

THE RAVISHING GARDENS OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT LOUIS BENECH DEFY HIS FRENCH HERITAGE OR THE INFLUENCE OF HIS TIME SPENT IN ENGLAND FOR A SIGNATURE STYLE THAT IS SOFT, NATURAL AND INTERNATIONAL. ON THE EVE OF THE RELEASE OF HIS NEW BOOK, "TWELVE FRENCH GARDENS", WE SHOWCASE THE WORK OF THE MAN WHO WAS JUST CHOSEN TO REDESIGN A POCKET OF VERSAILLES AND WHO IS THE GO-TO GARDENER FOR GLOBAL TASTEMAKERS.

CHATEAU D'O NORMANDY  
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“Talking about formal versus informal is a sort of 18th century split of gardens,” says landscape gardener Louis Benech. So is the great debate of French versus English gardening still relevant? “No. Culture is really worldwide today and there are influences from all the world.”

Given that Benech is considered one of France’s leading gardeners who has worked on the Jardins des Tuileries, the Elysee gardens and was just chosen to develop a grove (or “bosquet”) of Versailles, his views on the globalisation of garden design might come as a surprise. But to describe Benech as the new Le Nôtre is to ignore the fact that he works all over the world, primarily on smaller private projects. Indeed, he has become the go-to gardener for a demographic of tastemakers including Diane von Furstenberg and the family that owns Hermes. (His connection to the world of fashion is deep through his long-term relationship with Christian Louboutin).





DAR AHLAM - PHOTOGRAPHY © ERIC SANDER





## Louis Benech's

definition of luxury:

“The essence of luxury is something that you don't need. That's why a garden is not luxurious because in my opinion you need it! People today confuse luxury and money. A garden can cost a lot of money but very little also. You can have a divine result without spending a lot of money. The dreamy atmosphere you can find in a garden is luxurious. A true luxury is a mature garden. It has something which no one is able to produce which is age. I love Aston martins too...”

If luxury were ...

**An object:**

A hamac designed by Roubo for the gardens of Versailles.

**A moment:**

At the end of the day in a garden, when perfumes are coming out in the soft light of those instants before sunset.

**A place:**

If in Paris, the Roseraie de Bagatelle but it could be on one of the benches at Bois des Moutiers.

**A person:**

A Persian aristocrat in his garden pavillion.



SOLOGNE - PHOTOGRAPHY © ERIC SANDER





CHATEAU DE VILLANDRY - PHOTOGRAPHY © ERIC SANDER

Born on an island off the coast of France (“We didn’t have very many trees. When I went to the mainland, I was kissing trees.”), Benech discovered his love of gardens during childhood summers spent in Scotland and began his career working as an agricultural worker for Hillier nurseries in Hampshire, England. “What I loved in England was the love of plants which is much higher than in France,” he says. The influence of his time spent there was fundamental: “My approach is to treat a landscape in a very natural way,” he comments of his soft signature style which is truly international and sometimes references the structure of Japanese gardens.

At Versailles, Benech has been careful to respect the history of the site while also creating something original. “My way of working was to think if Le Nôtre would have been doing it today, what would he have done.” Despite the fact that his design is new and is infused with the art of Jean-Michel Othoniel who he invited to collaborate with him, he says, “I don’t feel guilty of working there. They will have something which is truly authentic.”





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BENCH NARA DESIGNED FOR LOUIS BENECH BY PHILIPPE HUREL





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Having worked on over 300 projects, Benech remains as enamoured with gardens as ever - see his definition of luxury on page 3. "They're very important and I see their role as a break into our lives." He defines his role: "To give a soft and serene environment to people."

**You studied law. How did you end up as a gardener?**

Initially, I always dreamed of working with trees more than just gardens. I really love trees because I was brought up on an island where we had very of them. When I went to France as we called the mainland, I was kissing trees. Growing up, I spent six or seven summers at Meikleour, a big 19th century house in Perthshire, Scotland, which is famous for its incredible walk of beech trees. I was gardening there almost all the time during the week. That contributed a lot to my gardening because he had a nice collection of late flowering rhododendrons and he was very much into the Robinson-type, wild and woodland garden. I adored all my Scottish summers but I studied law which was terribly boring to me because I was unable to do my dream which would have been working in the forestry world in France. Then when I had my degree I decided I could do what I had been wishing to do. I left for England where I worked at Hillier nurseries in Hampshire.



### **How did your time in England and Scotland influence your gardening?**

It definitely influenced it. The wild gardening which is very fashionable today was already like bread and butter in England. The house in Scotland was on the River Tay and we had no farming close to the house but everything was treated in a very natural way. Of course, what I loved in England was the love of plants which is much higher than in France.

My preferred type of English garden would be more the Gertrude Jekyll type which are formal in the way that there are rooms and spaces. This period of British garden had a true influence on my way of working because I love changes of atmosphere and it's quite connected to a contemporary way of living with a garden because the spaces are smaller than a park made by Capability Brown or Le Nôtre.

### **Is the debate of formality versus informality, French versus English gardens still relevant today?**

No. Culture is really worldwide today and there are influences from all the world. Talking about formal versus informal is a sort of 18th century split of gardens. Even in France we had some informal gardens which were

stopped because of the French Revolution. Probably some Capability Brown could have happened in France if the political situation was quieter because very little people did gardens during that period while it was a great era for gardening in England.

### **One of your most recent projects seems to have been influenced by Japanese gardens.**

There are places where I'm quite minimalist not for the love of being minimalist but which could be Japanese influenced. I did a garden in Paris only with formal ideas of structure. There are some edges that divide the space, there is a round pool and there is nothing more formal or classical than a round pool which is central in the axis of the garden. The way I planted it was with plenty of Japanese maples which give an atmosphere mixed with other exotic things which are not especially Japanese. In a Japanese garden all the plants would be Japanese. But the feeling of that garden is very Japanese because there are areas of mosses and because some of the plants are Japanese. There is an influence.

### **What are your priorities when approaching a new garden?**

The way I work depends on the client and on the place. This Japanese influence to the Paris garden was because the client told me how much she loved the garden of her mother-in-law who had a garden in Paris full of bamboo. So I tried to keep in mind the atmosphere of that garden to make her happy. Apart from the site, the type of house, the way of living, I always consider the people I am working for. I try to listen. My pleasure is to make them happy.

### **How did you approach your most recent project, the restoration of the Bosquet du Théâtre d'Eau in the gardens of Versailles.**

What I tried to do was think for Versailles and not use Versailles as a fantastic place to work. My way of working was to think if Le Nôtre would have been doing it today, what would he have done. I analysed the way he worked there. He worked with acceleration of perspective which was one of his tricks. He was inspired himself by Palladio's theatres in Vicenza with three gates at the end of the Seine. He worked with a connection to the past so I tried to work with a connection which was him. I worked on the perspective,

on the water and on the fact that bosquet was dedicated to children because the three fountains at the top of the cascades were god children. The four groups at the lower level of the fountains were children playing. So I had children in mind. That's why I asked Jean-Michel Othoniel to collaborate with me because I thought that his work was easy for all generations to understand, especially children.

### **Why collaborate with an artist at all?**

I chose to work with Jean-Michel Othoniel, who is famous because for his work with glass beads. It has something which is very funfair in atmosphere - fun and joyful. I thought of him rather than someone minimalist or someone too conceptual, which would be wrong. My mythology was Le Nôtre and Louis XIV. He worked on something which is very connected to theatre. He has been working on drawings of dance movements made in the 17th century for Louis XIV. So again there is a true connection with the theatre and with the period but without cheating and it's totally creative.





NATIONAL ARCHIVES IN PARIS - PHOTOGRAPHY © ERIC SANDER

### **Did you consider restoring it to what is once was?**

There are plenty of difficult questions about redoing it as it was. Dreaming of what it was is always an interpretation. At this bosquet they did not have enough elements - especially on the sculptures - to redo it the way it was. No one is able to invent a statue which has disappeared. We have the drawings, we know which metal they were but there is no way of copying them because we don't have the original. So I don't feel guilty of working there. They will have something which is truly authentic in the bosquet.

### **Do you feel pressure at Versailles to work as Le Nôtre did?**

When people say to me, 'Do you feel as being Le Nôtre'? there is absolutely no connection. I love his work, I love to try to understand how he worked. But he worked for a type of person who no longer exists today. It's not only a question of timing but a question of context. My way of working is very simple when it's in a free place with just a natural landscape like in New Zealand or in a place untouched by gardening.

### **What else are you working on?**

I'm working on a contemporary art foundation in Porquerolles in the south of France. These islands are incredible

gifts: wild, very protected islands not far from St Tropez. I'm going to work in an incredibly gentle way not to touch many things.

### **How do you see the role of gardens, both public and private?**

They're very important and I see their role as a break into our lives. To give a soft and serene environment to people. When I'm working in cities, which happens quite rarely, I destroy any contact with the speed of modern life. When people enter a garden I love them to be cut from noise. I don't like to use the word dream but to be able to place people in a space where they will be allowed to think differently. My enormous pleasure is to enjoy a garden alone, which is incredibly selfish!

### **What are the key principles that can turn any garden, or even a small terrace, into a Louis Benech space?**

My advice would be to be juste. To think that your place is different and that you are different. If you are pleased by shocking pink then be shocking pink! I love when gardens are connected to their surroundings in the form of a continuity of the spirit of the place. In a small place my first priority is to establish the connection and to overwork this connection. Use climbers to hide walls and keep a bit of sky!





**Which are your favourite gardens around the world, both public and private?**

There is one I simply adore. It's a place called Glenveagh Castle in Co. Donegal, Ireland, which is a very classical vision of a garden at a faux medieval house on a loch. The way in which you reach the place is incredible through moors and then at a turn of a hill you find heather, then rhododendrons, then at the next curve 2 or 3 rhododendrons and then the Scottish pine. Next the start of a lake. Then gradually you reach an oasis on the lake with that house. There is an Italianate garden, a kitchen garden, an idea of a Japanese garden which is great because it's not at all Japanese. There is a tropical garden because it's mild in Donegal. The entrance to the castle is covered with fuchsias on the wall as tall as the house - a rain of gentle red flowers. One plant but the effect is incredible. It was built during the 30s and there is an incredible swimming pool which is built inside the lake. You have a little bridge just above the water. And then a band of stone which separates a heated swimming pool. You have the feeling of swimming in the lake and that the stone is floating. It's like land art also because you see steam coming from just a rectangle of the lake. It's incredibly modern. Finally, the landscape around the place is magnificent.

**More Info:** [www.louisbenech.com](http://www.louisbenech.com)

**"Louis Benech, douze jardins en France"**

**Préface de Erik Orsenna, de l'Académie française. Textes de Eric Jansen  
Photographies de Eric Sander**

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