

The entrance of a chateau near Orleans, France; the grounds were restored by French landscape designer Louis Benech. The house is flanked by lilac bushes and Atlas cedars, and Benech had the yews shaped into cones. See Resources.

RESTORED *to* GLORY

In bringing new life to the neglected gardens surrounding an 18th-century French château, acclaimed landscape designer Louis Benech balances classic formality with clean-lined modernity

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EVEN THE MOST intrepid buyer might find acquiring a down-at-the-heels late-18th-century château a daunting experience—all the more so if the landscaping around it has also been neglected. This was the situation facing a French couple who purchased precisely such a château near Orléans in the late 1990s. But when it came to reviving the grounds, they knew exactly what to do: They contacted Louis Benech, a French garden designer with an affinity for restoration projects.

Benech has a reputation for creating landscapes that fit seamlessly into their natural surroundings. His career got a jump-start in 1990 when, as he tells it, he was “dragged” into partnership by a fellow landscape designer for an international competition to redevelop the Tuileries gardens in front of the Louvre. To his surprise, they won, and since then he has made and remade gardens in many parts of the world for a roster of high-profile clients, including François Pinault, Guy de Rothschild, and Princess Caroline of Monaco. For the owners of this estate, Benech had already worked on their garden in Paris.

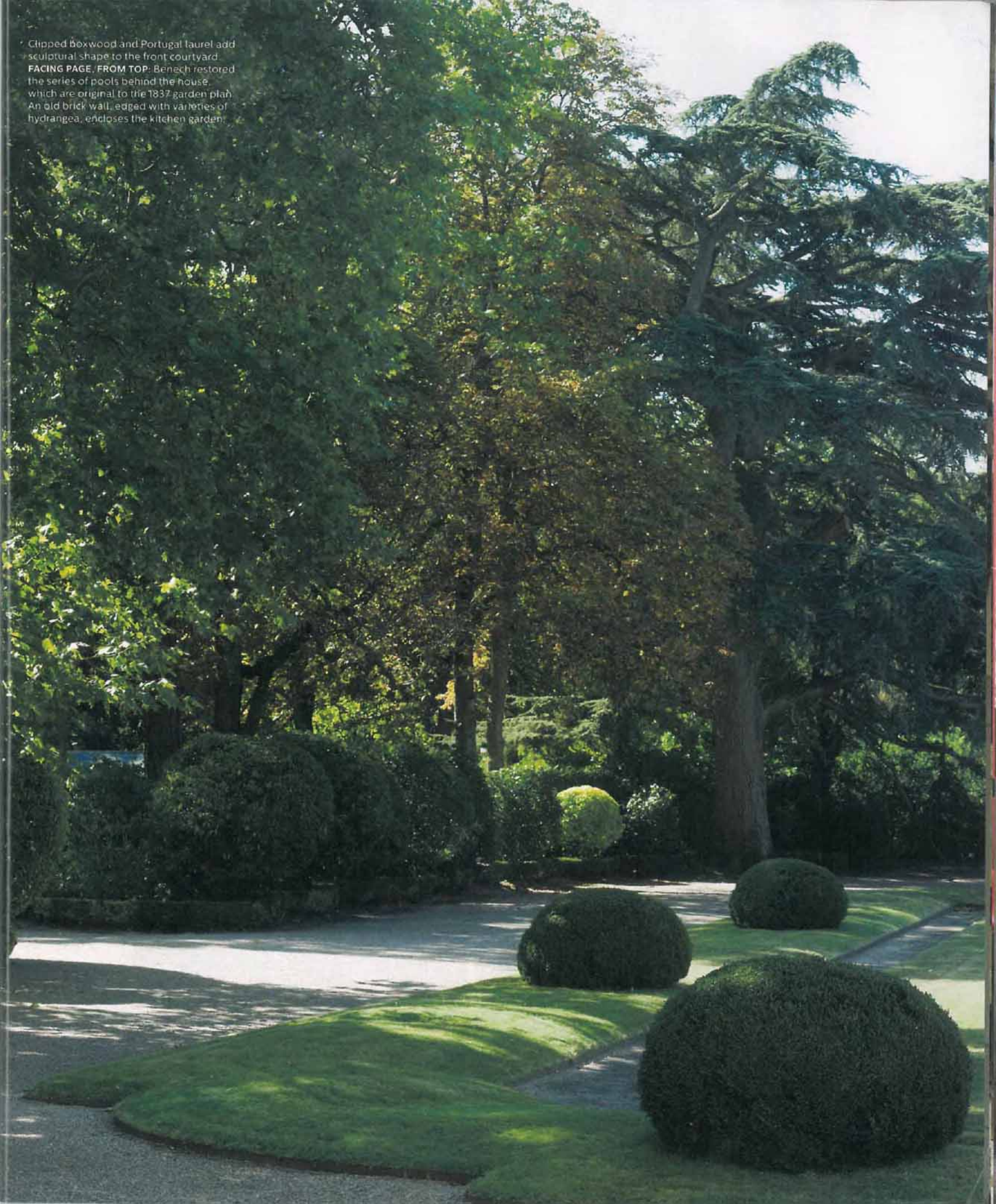
The bones of the formal garden were intact, and the designer’s mandate was to bring the place back to life. “Just the kind of project I relish,” says Benech, who is as passionate about plants as he is about design. “I devised a plan, and my clients had complete confidence in what I wanted to do and have been the easiest people to work for.”

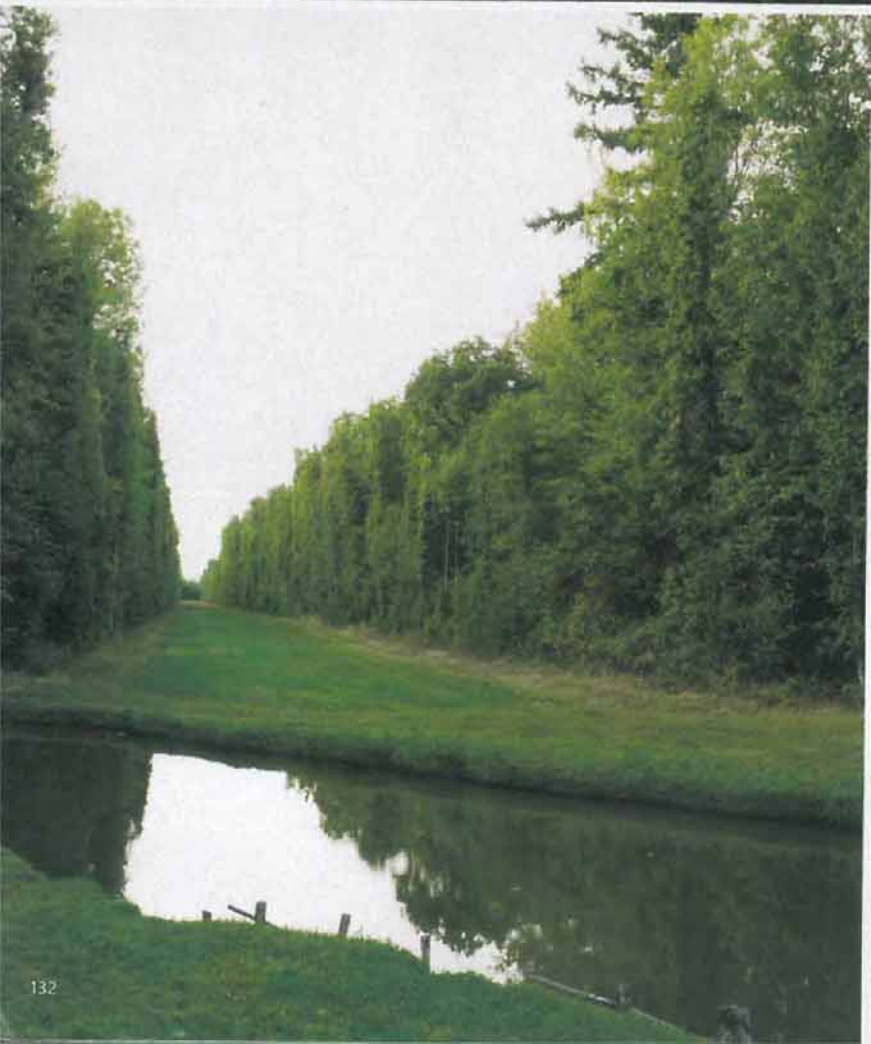
The château is approached by an imposing drive that opens into a circular forecourt, edged with four huge conical-shaped yews. From here, a pair of gates leads to a formal arrangement of long, curved grass beds, punctuated with neatly clipped rounds of boxwood. Today, the long gravel driveway looks as it always has, but its giant yew topiaries have been fastidiously clipped, and Benech has cleaned, cleared,



Clipped boxwood and Portugal laurel add sculptural shape to the front courtyard.

FACING PAGE, FROM TOP: Benach restored the series of pools behind the house, which are original to the 1837 garden plan. An old brick wall, edged with varieties of hydrangea, encloses the kitchen garden.







Antlers line the walls and ceiling of an outbuilding used for luncheons after hunts; beyond the hedges and box topiaries is the kitchen garden. **FACING PAGE, FROM TOP:** A sculpture of the Three Graces overlooks the largest of three pools. A canal at the rear of the property and one of the three allées of European hornbeam, maple, black locust, and Norway spruce, this one leads to the nearby village of Sandillon.



and, where necessary, replanted a grove of oaks on either side of the house. “The secret of taking a 19th-century garden and making it less labor-intensive lies in the details,” says Benech, citing, for example, his use of low metal strips to separate the curving grass beds from the gravel for easier maintenance. Another subtle improvement was to screen out the road by planting two overlapping, parallel hornbeam hedges that cars must pass between before reaching the drive.

The original 1837 plan of the garden shows an austere landscape, organized around three ornate pools that fall steeply away from the house and are linked by a series of grass banks, steps, a fountain, and a grotto. The water is supplied by a system of canals, and each pool is substantially larger than the one before. A total restoration was needed, as the pools were decrepit, the drainage clogged, and the stonework crumbling. Benech honored the grandeur of the original plan but added hidden ramps to make the steepness of the intervening grass slopes easier to mow. Today, the stonework is repaired, the pools are pristine, and the water circulates freely. His own contribution is the addition of a water maze, which he calls his “labyrinthine canal.” While its minimal design is unmistakably modern, it fits hand in glove with the formality of the classical plan. Not surprisingly, the maze is, says Benech, “my favorite part of the restoration.”

The owners, she especially, love flowers, and because there was no kitchen or cutting garden on the property, they requested that Benech make them one. His solution was to create a rectangular-shaped garden, enclosed by an old brick wall, on the site of what had been a Christmas tree nursery belonging to a previous owner. The layout is charmingly formal and consists of 14 square beds, each hedged with boxwood and arranged in strict symmetry around a small pool.

The plantings, though, are anything but severe, and Benech has introduced an exuberant mix. There are peonies and modern hybrid roses. One square is reserved entirely for herbs. Different varieties of hydrangea are planted against the brick wall, and the intersecting paths that traverse the garden are made of a fine gravel that looks like sand. “I intentionally went for an old-fashioned look, no fussy, complicated color scheme, because I wanted to make something that seemed as if it had always been there,” says Benech. In fact, his use of naturalist plants in a formal setting is a signature—what one colleague has called “haute couture for gardens.”

Benech believes that the key to garden restoration is “gentle intervention” and modestly insists his role is “to enhance what is already there.” But as this remarkable garden proves, it takes an exceptional talent to pull off such an ambitious project with panache. ■

Benech designed the water maze, which lies between two of the property's original pools; the terra-cotta vessel, called a *pot-à-feu*, was hand made in 1835 in Orléans. **FACING PAGE:** Boxwood hedges define the beds in the kitchen garden, which surrounds a brick-walled pool; the plantings include flowers and vegetables, as well as plum, pear, and apple trees.

