

MANSION

Blooming Brilliant

French landscape architect Louis Benech blends illusion and reality to create covetable gardens

BY J.S. MARCUS

THE GRITTY STREETS of Belleville, in northeast Paris, have acquired a hipster aura in recent years, but it's the last place you might expect to find the landscape architect Louis Benech. Based in a secluded house off boulevard de la Villette, Mr. Benech, 57 years old, is the garden designer of first resort for members of the French establishment, who tend to make their homes at the opposite end town.

The life partner of shoe designer Christian Louboutin, Mr. Benech is a celebrity in his own right in France, thanks to his work in the 1990s on the Jardin des Tuileries. He is currently finishing up a commission to redo a section of the gardens at Versailles. But over the past few decades, much of his work has been creating unique gardens for clients with names like Rothschild, Guinness and Pinault.



Born near Paris, Mr. Benech grew up on the Île de Ré, a windswept island off France's Atlantic coast. Sojourns back on the mainland, in the gardens of relatives and family friends, left a deep impression. "I was raised on an island without trees," he says, "but I developed a strange habit of kissing trees."

Compared with the crafted wildness of English gardens, French gardens can seem strict and geometric, but Mr. Benech—who trained as a lawyer before rediscovering his true calling—sees the tradition differently. In France, the great gardens are about "the relationship between illusion and reality,"

he says, a tension he often employs. The rationalism of French gardening, he argues, may be the means, but it is rarely an end. "Sometimes you don't need to make sense," he says, "just give pleasure."

Here, a look at three of his best-known private gardens.



ROOFTOP GARDEN, Paris

This page from top left, Eric Sander; Agence de Louis Benech; Eric Sander. Opposite page, Eric Sander.



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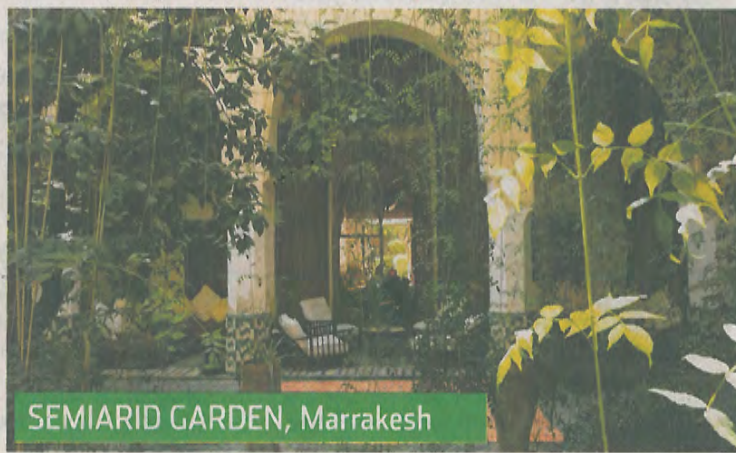
The Esplanade des Invalides, on Paris's Left Bank, is one of the capital's most impressive public spaces—and one of its windiest. In 2004-05, Mr. Benech created a two-story, 125-square-meter landscaped terrace for Jean-Louis Dumas, the former chairman of Hermès, and his Greek-born wife, architect Rena Gregoriadès. "It's not a garden," insists Mr. Benech, "it's a decoration."

The challenge was to accommodate the opposing horticultural tastes of the pair. Mr. Dumas "was keen on Japan," says Mr. Benech, while his wife preferred the Mediterranean flora of her native country. Plants include Jap-

anese mint, magnolia and hydrangea on the north part of the terrace.

By using different levels of planters, Mr. Benech managed to disguise the terrace's unattractive railings, which he calls "architectural details of poor quality." And he used sturdy but relatively transparent grasses, instead of dense foliage. The grasses do well in the windy conditions, and don't obscure the spectacular views.

IF YOU HAVE AN URBAN ROOFTOP GARDEN: Don't "use bamboo of any kind," advises Mr. Benech. The roots can wreak havoc with waterproofing.



SEMIARID GARDEN, Marrakesh

In 2002-03, Mr. Benech designed a series of gardens, totaling nearly 2,000 square meters, for the grounds of a classic riad in Marrakesh. The palace itself dates back to the early 19th century and has had a "cascade of glamorous owners," says Mr. Benech, including the actor Alain Delon. The current owners, the French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy and his wife, had planned to use the house throughout the year, except for the hot summer months.

A main challenge on the project was the clients' wish not to see actual soil, compounded by a desire for areas of lawn, which aren't well suited for the

extreme conditions of Marrakesh, where winter can combine hot days with freezing nights. Mr. Benech created heavy shade with plants including glory-bower, a fragrant shrub, and mousehorn, an evergreen shrub. For the sunny areas, Mr. Benech planted roses for the particular pleasure of the "maitresse de maison." Roses also happen to be "very Moroccan," he adds.

IF YOU HAVE A GARDEN IN A SEMI-ARID CLIMATE: That doesn't mean you won't have access to water, says Mr. Benech. So don't plant for drought-like conditions if you don't have to.

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SUMMER GARDEN,
St. Tropez

Mr. Benech created this hectare-size garden in 1994-95 for a villa belonging to French businessman François Pinault. The house is near the Chapelle de Ste-Anne, a simple but remarkable Provençal-style church. The steeple, though not a part of the property, was used as a visual element in the final garden design.

St. Tropez lies on the northern side of an eastward-jutting peninsula. The property, which overlooks the Gulf of St. Tropez, faces north. This meant careful planning. Northern light may be beautiful but, even in a southern climate, "it is not good for many plants," says Mr. Benech. "That's why I only planted the bougainvillea on the south side of the house," he says—a spot, he laments, "without the view."

Knowing that his clients would primarily enjoy the garden in the summer months, he emphasized plants that bloom in summer, like yellowhorn, a large shrub that produces a white flower. He also included "plants for fun," like cordyline, a woody ornamental plant, and banana trees.

IF YOU HAVE A GARDEN AT YOUR SUMMER HOUSE: Don't forget to plant for pleasure, advises Mr. Benech.



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