

Flower

Power

Louis Benech's gardens for Prince and Princess Stanislas Poniatowski have turned the French couple's rural retreat into a paradise on earth

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White Shasta daisies and purple dame's rocket bloom at Château du Bois Hinoust, Leticia and Stanislas Poniatowski's home in Cernay, France; garden guru Louis Benech has been working on the property for nearly 30 years. For details see Sources.

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he first major commission secured by French garden designer Louis Benech, in 1987, was outside the village of Cernay, not far from Chartres. Things did not get off to an auspicious start. "The home is easy to find if you come from Paris, but I got lost driving from Normandy and was terrified because I was late," remembers Benech, now a globally renowned talent with more than 300 extraordinary gardens under his belt. "When I got on the right road, the landscape became quite boring—flat brown fields as far as you could see. I thought, Who would want to live in a place like this?"

The *who* are Prince Stanislas Poniatowski, a jovial businessman whose ancestors once ruled Poland, and his wife, Leticia. The pair had recently moved back to France after several years living in the U.S. and had purchased Château du Bois Hinoust, a centuries-old property, as a country house to share with their children. The brick-and-stone structure was surrounded by a glittering moat and several underwhelming, awkwardly shaped acres. Around all that lay miles of remarkably horizontal farmland. "From a distance it looked like an island in the middle of a desert," Benech says. "But when I pulled up to the house, I could see potential."

Prince Poniatowski recognized similar promise in the young designer, who was a friend of one of Leticia's sisters. "Louis was late—he always is—but we didn't mind because he is very charming," he recounts. The trio strolled past ill-conceived garden features and overgrown fruit trees and began to dream.

Although he does not have a signature style, the designer, whose latest high-profile project is Château de Versailles's first new garden since the 18th century, is known for mixing French formalism with a more naturalistic English approach to planting. His understanding of the former helped him immediately recognize and address two layout issues: an eyesore of a swimming pool set far too close to the house and an adjoining square of lawn enclosed by boxwood. "Nothing was in balance," he recalls. His solution for the pool was to hide it from view behind a yew hedge, which helped even out the proportions of that section of the grounds. As for the boxwood square—now used as a croquet lawn—Benech cut an opening into either end and extended outward with borders of shrubs and perennials to create a long thoroughfare that leads from the pool to the other side of the property.

"There is a great progression of blooms throughout the year," says Prince Poniatowski. "Tulips in spring, roses in the summer, and then come the artichokes—and you have to decide whether to eat them or let them flower." Parallel to the walk, Benech erected a vast pergola and then smothered it with purple



Silvery willow-leaf pear trees overlook beds of irises, peonies, alliums, and boxwood topiaries; in the foreground, a cordon apple tree serves as a low hedge.

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Dalmatian and bearded irises bask in the sun beside the château's moat. **Opposite:** Mossy ledges host Dalmatian bellflowers and planters containing hostas, geraniums, and autumn daffodils.



A saucer magnolia arches over the moat. **Left:** Landscape designer Louis Benech in his element.

clematis, red 'Madame Isaac Pereire' roses, and rampant grapevines. "Now you can stand anywhere and not be able to tell that the garden's lines are uneven," the designer says.

The very best gardens benefit from two things—time and harmonious human relationships. Le Bois Hinoust's landscape has had both. His early work completed, Benech has returned regularly to monitor the garden's progress, visits that have deepened his friendship with the Poniatowskis. Years ago the couple purchased some adjacent land, including an old farm, and asked Benech to take it in hand; among his improvements is a glorious magnolia walk flanked by two perfectly round ornamental pools. The designer emphasized texture in this new area, choosing species with variegated foliage and interesting shapes and avoiding plants that need constant pruning. As he says, "You don't know how much work it is until you've had to clip everything yourself."

Eventually another next-door plot became available, so the couple acquired it, too. "At first I thought I'd plant it with wheat or barley or some other agricultural crop," the prince says. "Then Louis came up with the idea of flowers." In spring and summer the added acreage becomes a riotous carpet of white Shasta daisies and purple dame's rocket. "In the beginning Stanislas and Leticia's house ignored the views," Benech says. "But now the flowers seem to flow into the farmland."

Today Le Bois Hinoust remains a creative partnership. Though the Poniatowskis check in with Benech for advice, they have also made their own bold alterations, such as mowing two intersecting paths through the flower field. "I don't mind at all if they make changes," says the designer. "It means they love their garden." For the couple, working with Benech has offered a rare opportunity to learn from and experiment with one of the finest designers of his generation. "I'm not sure what we'll do next," the prince muses. "I find that as you age you get more interested in trees. I think we'll have to plant some more with Louis now, before we get too old to see them grow up." □



PORTRAIT BY M. G. DE SAINT VENANT



From top: Scarlet German irises brighten a border packed with lilac, sweetshrub, variegated mock orange, and lamb's ear. An heirloom stone basin centers a walled garden, where topiaries add rhythm and whimsy. Boxwood hedges embrace northern sea oats and red-osier dogwoods.



Grapevines blanket a teak pergola, shading red 'Madame Isaac Pereire' roses and purple 'Jackmanii Superba' clematis; the arch beyond is draped with 'Multijuga' wisteria and more 'Madame Isaac Pereire.'

