

How His Gardens Grew

Louis Benech, France's most revered landscape designer, looks back on his seminal projects, testaments to his glorious gift and to the constant, occasionally heartrending, effects of time.

BY DANA THOMAS



GARDENS ARE “an expression of faith” and “the embodiment of hope,” wrote the revered English landscape architect Russell Page in his memoir, “The Education of a Gardener,” in 1962. If you’re lucky, you start with a blank slate and some time in the future, years later, it may become something like what you had in mind. Gardens are forever evolving and growing, like children to adulthood, and like all things in nature, they can be hobbled by disease, or refashioned for the times or, on

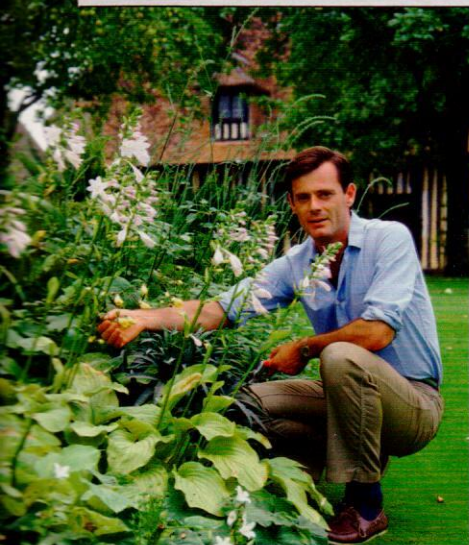
occasion, brutally destroyed before reaching maturity — life interrupted. They hold a beauty and a sadness — seasonally, of course, from those early sprouts pushing through the softened earth of spring, to the autumn, when the leaves fade and fall and the barrenness of winter sets in, but also in their impermanence. Gardens continually remind us of our mortality.

No one knows this better than Louis Benech, France’s greatest living landscape designer. He humbly calls himself a gardener, a respectful bow to the power that is Mother Nature. In his 30 years in horticulture, designing, planting and maintaining gardens at some of the most glorious properties in Europe, including Loel Guinness’s Norman stud farm in

FUTURE PERFECT
Left: a 1990 view across a pool Benech installed at Mas Sainte-Anne, the home of François and Maryvonne Pinault outside Saint-Tropez. Above: more than 20 years later, the area is lush with lavender, *Helichrysum petiolare* and olive trees.

GROWING PAINS Clockwise from bottom left: Benech examining the plantings at Piencourt in 1988, after he was hired by Loel Guinness; an old postcard of the estate; the sun garden that Benech planted in shades of yellow and orange, with a mix of annuals, perennials, shrubs and grasses; a photo by Benech of just-planted yew trees to edge a shamrock-shaped garden in a woodland clearing, which would be razed before fully maturing.

Haras de Piencourt-Bailleul par Thiberville (Eure)



Piencourt, the Tuileries Garden in Paris and the Bosquet du Théâtre d'Eau at Versailles, Benech has watched his "babies," as he calls his plantings, grow. He finds, as we all do perhaps, that the pace of life is faster today than it was a generation ago. Estates are "no longer family-transferred like before" and maintained lovingly with a deference to history and patrimony, but sold to new owners who have a different take on how things should be, and a garden's lifespan is growing shorter.

Whereas once a gardener planted with the hope that in a half-century his work would be complete — slender saplings aging into great oaks, small shrubs into immense hedges — now a gardener may only have a few years. It is an artistry whereby the artist rarely sees his vision fully realized.

Newly single and facing 60, Benech is particularly reflective these days. He too has recently moved, into a charming three-story early 19th-century mews tucked away in a courtyard in Paris. He lives on the top floor, and works in the offices on the ground and second floors as well as out on the cobblestone terrace, nurturing more babies to plant in more gardens. He's kept an eye on most of them over the years. Some have grown gracefully into middle age; some have been radically altered, even razed. When he hears that has happened, "it does make me sad for a while," he admits. "But then I move on. That is how life, and nature, is. Constant evolution."

Haras de Piencourt, Upper Normandy

IN 1985, THE BANKER Loel Guinness, Gloria Guinness's widower, was looking for a new gardener for Haras de Piencourt. A friend introduced him to Benech, who was working for a nearby nursery. Guinness's mandate to Benech for his first-ever commission was simple: "Do whatever you want." Much revolved around maintenance. "Piencourt had been impeccably kept," Benech says. "Not one weed in the lawn. Wilderness could be suggested but it wasn't really existent." Soon, though, he began to make his mark, designing areas that were personal to Guinness. "Because he was Irish, I created a very organized woodland garden in the shape of a shamrock in an existing clearing." He also planted a sun garden, with orange and yellow flowers — the colors of the Guinness stable's racing silks — and a moon garden, with black, white and pale blue flowers. Little was sourced:

"Thousands of plants arrived as gifts from people Loel knew in the plant world, such as the Belgian horticulturalists Jelena and Robert de Belder," Benech says. "They sent beautiful plants, such as American dogwood, lilac and witch hazel." Benech adored his years at Piencourt. "I had the most wonderful rapport with this gentleman," he says. "Loel became like an adoptive grandfather to me. We saw each other every day he was there. I always maintained my place as household staff — he invited me to lunch only once — but we cared for each other dearly." Through Guinness, Benech met "the super crème" of the seaside resort of Deauville and started working on many of their gardens, too.

When Guinness died in 1988, Piencourt was inherited by his grandson. Benech stayed on for a bit, but left in 1990. Guinness's

In Nature



INTO THE WOODS Clockwise from top left: the pool at La Valterie in the '90s, right after Benech planted the garden, and, about five years later, blooming with yellow and green water-loving plants; newly planted boxwood under the trees in the early '90s, and the clipped promenade in its mature state 20 years on.



stepdaughter and daughter-in-law Dolores (the daughter of Gloria's first marriage, Dolores wed Loel's son from his first marriage), wasn't thrilled with "the garden or my friendship with Loel," Benech recalls. "So they bulldozed it. It's a sad story."

La Valterie, Normandy

THE FRENCH BUSINESS TYCOON Christian Tourres hired Benech to create a new landscape for La Valterie, an imposing 16th-century chateau, as part of a total overhaul of the estate. (Benech was friends with the previous owner, who made the introduction.) Tourres stripped the chateau of its gaudy 19th-century decorative additions, thereby restoring its architectural integrity, and wanted the landscape to match. Benech's first instinct was to unite the main house to the *pressoir*, the cider house, which had been restored as guest quarters. He linked the two with a walkway lined with clipped yew. He planted a row of pear trees to slightly obscure the cottage, and cut down scores of trees to let light into the chateau. On the south side of the house, he planted "white summer blooms and variegated foliage." The owner wanted a small enclosed garden next to the house, so Benech created "a semi-medieval" one, with yellow and gray plantings, such as golden marjoram and gray santolina in a chessboard pattern.

Since the property had loads of springs, he planted poplars, which thrive in wetlands. Most delightful, though, was the promenade he



SCENTS AND SENSIBILITY The walled garden Benech remade for Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé at Château Gabriel had formerly been a tennis court. He removed most of the lavender to plant scented flowers, like the trellises of roses, that would bloom later in the season when the couple was there.

created along the banks of the Vertefeuille, a rambling stream that cuts through the estate's apple trees. He framed the walk with "water lovers," natural ferns and rhododendrons, added a series of "tiny

THE LONG VIEW Below: the barren construction site at Mas Sainte-Anne, the estate of François Pinault, in 1989, as Benech was bulldozing to open a vista from the house to the sea. The central olive tree, which Benech planted, was later moved to a stand of olive trees elsewhere in the garden. Right: almost 30 years later, a ravishing garden lovingly maintained; visible in both pictures is the big, beautiful umbrella pine in the distance.



PURPLE HAZE Above: Benech thinned the existing vineyard rows, barely visible at the end of the zigzag clipped hedge path in the top photo. Left: in high summer, the clipped zigzag hedge is completely obscured by blue perovskia and lavender that grows around and inside it.



gardens," as he calls them, and a cluster of field maples "to keep the rural feeling of the site." For a while, no one used the house, but the on-site gardener maintained the chessboard garden as best he could. The property has since been sold. Benech would like to view it again, "to see how the trees are growing there."

Château Gabriel, Normandy

ONE AFTERNOON IN the mid-1980s, while Benech was working at the Hillier nursery in Normandy, Pierre Bergé stopped by to purchase some plants for Château Gabriel, the 19th-century country

home that he shared with "a friend" in Deauville. Benech was so impressed by his horticultural knowledge that he invited Bergé and his friend for tea at his place at the time, a mobile home. "I had no idea who he was," laughs Benech of the professional and personal partner of Yves Saint Laurent. "I had heard of Saint Laurent but not Pierre Bergé."

A couple of days later, Benech received a note from Bergé on Château Gabriel stationery spontaneously asking if he wanted to move to Marrakesh and look after the gardens of another of their properties, the ravishing Marjorelle Garden. Benech was flattered but declined and remained at Piencourt. A few years later, Benech and Bergé reconnected through a mutual friend. On a rainy August Sunday, Bergé drove over to Piencourt in his Rolls-Royce and asked Benech if he would like to redo a walled garden at the neo-Gothic Château Gabriel. This time, Benech agreed. The space — once a tennis court — was full of lavender, but by the time Bergé and Saint Laurent would arrive for their summer holiday, the plants would be past bloom. So Benech ripped them out and planted a medieval-inspired garden with flowering artichokes, cordoned fruit trees, herbs and fragrant



TREES OF LIFE Left: a concrete wall at Mas Sainte-Anne was deftly hidden by Italian cypress hedges, with rosemary and dwarf peach trees beneath. Below: on another side of the garden, a clipped checkerboard pattern made of two boxwood species. Bottom: a parking lot was hidden by plantings of bay laurel.



flowers such as tuberoses. It's a typically considerate Benech flourish: He wanted Saint Laurent, who had poor eyesight, to be able to enjoy the garden's scent.

Later, he designed the gardens along the walkway to the property's dacha — a folly inspired by Saint Laurent's first trip to Russia. "Pierre was a dream client," Benech remembers. "He knew plants and he was so intelligent and respectful." In another sad story, Bergé sold the house to a Russian businessman, and Benech has not seen the gardens since.

Mas Sainte-Anne, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur

BENECH FIRST MET FRANÇOIS and Maryvonne Pinault in the late 1980s. They knew of his work and invited him to redo the garden of La Montmaire, their 17th-century chateau outside Paris, in the forest of Rambouillet. The Pinaults were so pleased with the outcome they hired Benech to do the gardens of Mas Sainte-Anne, their hilltop home outside of the Mediterranean town of Saint-Tropez. Benech had spent many summers at his maternal grandmother's Provençal garden, with its lavender, olive trees and blanket of white Coulter's Matilija poppies. Those memories provided inspiration for what became a massive undertaking, one that began in 1989. Benech first opened up the view of the bay, clearing a dying umbrella pine and several towering cypresses and cutting back a eucalyptus. He thinned the existing vineyards, pulling up every other row. He built walls and drains to help with flooding. He hid the parking lot with a hedge of bay trees and plumbago, which, he says, "has beautiful blue flowers in the summer. This is how I plant. It's not that I have a plan

and I say, 'Hmm ... where should I put this?' Plantings need to have a purpose and a result."

Benech also added an olive grove and a lemon orchard off to the side of the house, and a "divine olive tree, several centuries old." Pinault, a renowned art collector and the owner of the auction house Christie's, picked out the tree himself. "He said, 'It's like a sculpture,'" says Benech, who occasionally revisits Mas Sainte-Anne. He's pleased by the garden's maturation, and particularly the Himalayan maple that he grew from seed. ▀