



Southern comforts

Les Confines, Provence, France

Louisa Jones finds a feast for the senses
in a designer's own Provençal country garden

Photographs by Clive Nichols

DESIGNER Dominique Lafourcade transforms old farmsteads in Provence into elegant, semi-formal pleasure gardens for year-round use. She often works in tandem with her husband, Bruno, and his son, Alexandre, builders who restore historic properties with the same exquisite taste Mme Lafourcade brings to gardening. Their work has helped establish a model now imitated in California and Australia, a contemporary Mediterranean version



of the 18th-century *ferme ornée*.

The Lafourcades' own garden, Les Confines, was redesigned by them in the early 1990s. It covers some two acres set in the larger patchwork of apple cordons and cypress hedging typical of the Alpilles hills south of Avignon. In keeping with today's preference for intimate family living, the Lafourcades chose a long, ochre-toned farmhouse rather than a *château*. They were drawn to this property because of its mature trees: a row of white oaks along the north side,

The clipped cypresses, *Viburnum tinus*, lavenders, rosemary and box create a series of views along and across the gardens, punctuated by potted *Opuntia* cacti at regular intervals

stately planes to the south. These giants, underplanted with broadleaf evergreen shrubs, create a layered effect that welcomes the sun's warmth in winter and provides a cool refuge in summer. Visitors arriving and parking on the north side get no glimpse of what lies beyond, and access to the main garden is discreet: just a small door in a tall wooden fence. Once opened, it reveals a vast world of green magic, full of intriguing detail.

Most Provençal gardeners find

they have to work with slopes, levels and terracing, even on valley land, but in this locality, the Lafourcades encountered a large, flat rectangle. Mme Lafourcade perpetuates the old Provençal tradition of the green garden. Many distinct compartments are outlined in evergreen hedging, which combine elegance and wind protection. The Mediterranean plant palette offers a wide choice of tough species: cypresses (*Cupressus sempervirens*), *Viburnum tinus*, box and rosemary, to name but a few. ➤

She also uses *Thuja* and even Leyland cypress to create a kind of labyrinth, in which each 'room' has its own character.

The main southern sweep takes in masterful patterns and shadows created by evergreen and deciduous foliage, not only for seasonal comfort, but also for the play of shadows on flat, open spaces. Within it, a central rill, or *chemin d'eau*, is edged very simply with soft, grey lamb's ears, *Stachys lanata*. Out of slender margins of lawn on either side rise massive earthenware pots planted with young olive trees. Citrus trees are traditionally grown in this manner, but not olive trees. Mme Lafourcade enjoys the contrast between the olive foliage—green in winter and spring, silver in summer—and the warm terracotta. Unlike their field-grown counterparts, olives in pots require summer watering (a drip system is used) and winter protection (with straw matting, decorative in itself when wrapped around the pots).

Long pergolas run along the east and west sides of the central rectangle, reinforcing the symmetrical design. Made of untreated pine, they are draped in the traditional ramblers of the region: wisteria and grapevines. Old roses, kiwi vines and blackberries have been added. Mme Lafourcade loves the idea of grazing as you walk. 'Pleasure for the eye is good,' she explains, 'but the pleasure

Right The Lafourcades were drawn to this property because of its mature trees, including the row of stately planes, one of which accommodates a timber and ironwork stairway up to a viewing platform in the canopy, looking onto a symmetrical garden of clipped evergreens in an enclosed area beside one end of the house.

Facing page
An inviting grass path under the planes



of tasting and smelling at the same time, this is fantastic!' Flanking the pergola walks are long strips of iris (carefully matched in tone to the wisteria), patches of Sweet William, daylilies and *Sedem spectabile*. After the wisteria come the roses, then large squares of aromatic lavender, followed by swathes of silver Russian sage (*Perovskia atriplicifolia*) in the middle distance, on either side of the potted olives.

A series of smaller spaces is subordinate to the main vista: an Italianate semicircle lies at one end

of the house, a grey-and-blue garden at the other. There is an enclosed rose garden, an intimate herb garden, a semi-formal potager with greenhouse and a fairy-tale garden shed. A secret 'Portuguese' garden surrounds a small pool for private swims, *siestas* and quiet conversation. A 'boule' garden pays playful homage to the sphere in both stone and foliage. All are enclosed and defined by evergreens. The most recent addition is an 'African' garden, flanking a new but carefully hidden swimming pool that the Lafourcades have added for the ➤



Left A view of the house from across the waterlily pond and shaded terrace. The Lafourcades gentrify old farmsteads by imposing symmetry on both architecture and garden, though the formality of these *fermes ornées* is always adjusted to site and climate for year-round pleasure, rather than showcase display





Above The view down the main vista, with its light-reflecting rill and lily pond. The avenue of olive trees in their terracotta pots reinforces the sense of perspective, and the taller surrounding trees create a sense of enclosure but also elevation in this generally flat site. ***Left*** Paths also provide ample opportunities for detail and craftsmanship

pleasure of summer renters. Its mix of exotic grasses is unlike any other part of the garden. Each section, says Mme Lafourcade, 'must produce its own emotion. Gardens are, above all, about feeling'.

Like all truly creative people, Mme Lafourcade cannot stop. She is constantly trying her hand at new features, such as cutouts of bulls in sheet metal, their contours copied from blown-up photographs, that seem to graze in the wildflower meadow. In the garden, her only help is one gardener (nicknamed Le Nôtre) and sometimes her mother and sister. The evergreen bones of this garden are mostly pruned by Mme Lafourcade herself, with hand shears, to get a soft, smooth cut. And yet, this garden has a relaxed, welcoming atmosphere. Herons stop here to fish for frogs in the pool. There are ducks and a chicken coop near the potager. There are several delightful places for dining alfresco, according to weather and the time of day. Mme Lafourcade has managed a style that is classic and original, stately yet playful, personal and, certainly, Provençal. *For more information, visit www.dominique-lafourcade.com or www.architecture-lafourcade.com*

