

Year-round beauty in the hills

Villa Fort France, Magagnosc, Grasse, France

David Wheeler visits the home of artist Valérie de Courcel, made famous in the 1930s by actress-turned-writer Winifred Fortescue

Photographs by Clive Nichols

WITHOUT explanation, 'Fort France' was one of a dozen or so places in the South of France recommended by a friend who had put together a list of gardens I should see on and near the Côte d'Azur. Because of its name, I hesitated, imagining a castellated monstrosity with municipal plantings built by the state to protect itself from invading hordes or, at the very least, perhaps, an architectural flight of fancy thrown up by an eccentric Victorian individual to impress his neighbours. But, as I soon discovered, it's no more possible to judge a piece of real estate by its name than it is to judge a book by its cover.

My path of discovery on a hot, early-September morning last year was deeply shaded, and a cooling breeze filtering through olive foliage restored my spirits after a sinuous drive up from the coast. Better still, a welcoming Valérie de Courcel stood behind a narrow gate beneath a tree laden with ripe, purple plums, confirming that my satnav hadn't led me astray—despite the absence of any looming fort.

Oddly, the villa's name is rooted in England—and in English. Enter fashion designer, interior decorator, newspaper columnist, author and former actress Winifred Fortescue (first clue), wife of Sir John Fortescue—28 years her senior—military historian, archivist and librarian to George V. The Fortescues settled in the South of France (second clue) and acquired The Domaine (as it was then called) at Magagnosc, on the outskirts of Grasse, in the early 1930s. Their expansion and makeover of the property amusingly unfolds in Winifred's 1935 bestseller, *Perfume from Provence*.

'My knowledge of technical French was *nil* when the building operations began,' she writes, 'but I found my

natural gift for dancing more valuable than anything else. If one only danced energetically enough, things got done.' The Fortescues' 56-year-old gardener and general factotum, Hilaire, worked tirelessly to help shape and plant the sloping terrain, turning up 'during the heat of August... at 5.30a.m.' to water the garden. Even on the Sabbath, we are told, Hilaire was there, for he 'did not love to see the fruits of His earth die for want of care'.

It was the Fortescues' successor at The Domaine who renamed it, in honour of 'the Fortescues in France'. The present owners, Pierre and Valérie de Courcel, bought it in 1991 from a Belgian chemist, Jeanne Grunaux, who, by that time, had added many medicinal and other herbs to the garden.

Fort France stands at some 1,100ft above sea level, with southerly views towards wooded hills that roll between Grasse and the Golfe de la Napoule, west of Cannes. Its altitude is responsible for occasional winter weather unknown along the Mediterranean coast (Lady Fortescue records an 'Arctic interval' and her southern-Italian housekeeper's cry of '*La neige! La belle neige!*' in their first December).

The garden is steeply terraced, in the manner of all hillside olive groves. Foliage rustling in the breeze is accompanied by the sound of water gently falling through channels and underground culverts from one level to the next; the combined fragrances of native aromatics and cultivated flowers seem to imitate the costly perfumes long manufactured so famously throughout this region.

Among the year's first attractions is *Garrya elliptica*, when its 12in-long >

Perched in the hills close to Grasse, the villa was named to commemorate the Fortescues, in France





catkins appear as early as January. Then, the mimosa starts to bloom, followed soon by legions of blue irises. Then come the peonies, both herbaceous and woody, flowering most years to coincide with the *Prunus* Ukon's big moment, when its distinctive and unusual greeny-cream clustered blossom smothers leafless branches.

A spectacular but transitory deep-pink carpet of fallen *Prunus serotula* flowers on an upper terrace materialises soon after, trumpeting the arrival of summer with its multitude of roses, filigreed and softened with eruptions of self-sown fennel. Roses perform spectacularly in this climate, some lasting well into autumn, bursting from between late-flowering perennials and tumbling from tall trees.

The de Courcelles are also spoiled by the fruit that this climate nurtures. 'We enjoy not only our own apples, plums, peaches, grapes, raspberries, apricots, figs and mulberries, but also oranges, mandarins, lemons, kumquats and such exotics as persimmon, feijoa, jujube, capers and prickly pear.'

Foliage is highly valued, too, especially in high summer when it knits everything together as in a well-crafted tapestry. Ferns relish the deeper shade of narrow, winding paths, forming a link with other evergreens and the small coniferous plants so thoroughly at home on a Provençal hillside.

The region's occasional harsh winters unflinchingly yield to hot summers, long seasons when the pond waters at Fort France imbue the atmosphere

Above: When summer arrives, the leaves on the planes will have expanded into parasols, providing shade for those sitting out to admire the view. Self-sown *Euphorbia characias* ssp. *Wulfenii* erupts out of the gravel with its lime-green 'bottle-brushes'

with a limpid film, helping to freshen the air and lure the most beneficial of all garden animators, the insects and birds. Water is also home to aquatic and marginal plants—water lilies, mounds of papyrus and farfugiums, whose large, dark-green, disc-shaped leaves suggest the Tropics.

Among the richly assorted and seemingly randomly assembled plants—more than 1,000 different kinds—there are the sturdy bones of the garden to suggest the way in which visitors might determine a route. Apart from the strong east-west delineations of the terraced olive grove, there is a large, mixed border running west from the creamy villa itself, bathed in day-long sunshine and filled with a profusion of colourful shrubs and perennials.



Elsewhere, and unexpectedly sometimes, the hand of Man is seen among the garden's botanical cornucopia, manifesting itself in narrow and twisting stone staircases and some masterful examples of cloud-pruning, resulting in tufts of foliage at the ends of bare stems, adding yet another layer of light and airiness—and, indeed, playfulness.

Gardens are different things to different people. For the plantsman, it's perhaps an experimental lab; for some, it's a designer's drawing board; for others, it offers privacy and familial refuge. For Mme de Courcel, her garden is also a studio. From it, she takes inspiration for her large, semi-abstract canvases painted in bright, sometimes primitive, colours.

Asked to articulate the way she sees the relationship between her

Top: The topiarist's art is evident here and there, bringing moments of precision to counterbalance the seasonal florals. Above: A flowering stem of giant fennel, *Ferula communis*, above pools of *Gladiolus illyricus*

hands-on gardening and her artistic pursuits, she says: 'In a garden, everything must have its place. Each plant must, at a given moment in the season, be the star. Exactly as in an orchestra, where the unity of the musicians counts, but each instrument must have its own importance. Seeds are the musical notation, plants are the musicians, and the gardener is the conductor of the orchestra. It's the same in painting, a plant in repose is green, then it becomes yellow, red or white at a precise moment in the year, and it is the exact moment that is so important.'

The garden at Villa Fort France is a very great orchestra, with good tunes and convincing crescendos round every corner, the whole score superbly conducted by Mme de Courcel. 🐦

COUNTRY LIFE in the Côte d'Azur

FORT France is one of the highlights in a collection of outstanding private gardens in the Côte d'Azur that David Wheeler has arranged to visit in an exclusive tour for readers of COUNTRY LIFE. Organised in association with the garden travel specialist Boxwood Tours, the tour dates are September 24 to 29, 2013. For more information please contact: Boxwood Tours, Rhiw, Llanbedr, Gwynedd, LL45 2NT (01341 241717; mail@boxwoodtours.co.uk; www.boxwoodtours.com)