



## It's box, but not as we know it

*Jardins de Marqueyssac, Vézac, France*  
Set high on a spur, with far-reaching views  
along the valley of the Dordogne River,  
the remarkable gardens attached  
to a handsome Périgordian manor are  
one of the many wonders of the region,  
reveals Kirsty Fergusson

Photographs by Clive Nichols



**B**ETWEEN Bergerac and Sarlat, the Dordogne carves a wide and shimmering path through some of France's loveliest landscapes: limestone cliffs jut over the river, giving shelter to precipitous villages whose troglodyte dwellings are still inhabited today, rolling hills clothed in dense forests of evergreen oak are pierced by the turrets and high gables of medieval castles and valleys strewn with walnut groves and orchards are filled with flocks of fat geese and ducks. Kitchens that don't make use of the local *foie gras*, black truffles and walnuts are

thin on the ground in these parts.

However, it's not just epicureans who are in for a treat in Périgord. A rich seam of gardens has also been drawing attention to the region, many of which are serving to redefine the French art of topiary. Eyrignac, a garden begun in the 1960s just outside Sarlat, for example, is an exercise in sculpted perfection in which repetitive forms conceived in box, yew and hornbeam create a dynamic series of enclosures, each of individual character.

Losse, also on a tributary of the Dordogne, speaks of the present owner's

understanding of Italian Renaissance gardens, in which architectural topiary creates a sense of drama and volume—opposing the essential linearity of classical French formality, which has been reinvented with enormous panache on the terraces of Hautefort, further north of Losse.

Marqueyssac, however, perched on an escarpment 450ft above the River Dordogne is a topiary garden that defies categorisation and occupies a position that would be hard to equal. From the airy heights of the 17th-century ramparts, the views over the valley below and hills beyond are



*Preceding pages:* **Box of delights: the planting at Marqueyssac is like nothing you've ever seen before, both in terms of style and sheer abundance. When early-morning mists have dissipated, the distant farms and villages come into view far below.**

*Left:* **Not all the interest relies on greenery—this inventive allée is at once organic and architectural**

almost more than one pair of eyes can take in. Early-morning mist fills the valleys, making islands of the wooded hills. As the mist dissipates, peregrine falcons and black kites may be seen, circling below, gliding on thermals rising from the valley.

To the west, the soaring walls of the Château de Beynac dominate a bend in the river and, across the water, the turrets and towers of the Château de Castelnaud command the southern shores, reminders that, until 1442, this was the frontline between English Aquitaine and territories loyal to an embattled French throne.

Although constructed on the eve of the French Revolution, the long windows and rose-covered walls of Marqueyssac's handsome manor house, built in traditional Périgordian style with a steeply pitched roof of stone tiles, or *lauzes*, seem to speak of less troubled times. It was the country residence of the Sarlat-based Vernets and it's believed that Porcher, one of Le Nôtre's more distinguished pupils who worked in Sarlat, designed the impressive terraces that form the bastion bet-

**‘It's as disorientingly playful as it is seriously splendid,’**

ween manor house and cliff edge.

However, the person responsible for filling these terraces with an astonishing (some might say obsessive) composition of box topiary was Julien de Cerval, whose grandfather had married a Vernet. Cerval, a Sarlat magistrate, had a number of passions outside the administering of justice: he grew fruit trees, studied agronomy and was also a stout defender of the papacy—in 1849, he went to Italy as a member of the Italian Legion to defend the Papal states.

In 1861, on his return, he retired to Marqueyssac, where he was able to give ample expression to his newly acquired passions for the Italian—or, specifically, Tuscan—landscape and

**Drives and paths lead the visitor from the house to the belvedere, with plenty of places to explore or rest and enjoy along the way**

the possibilities of box topiary. This accounts for the four-square, red-tiled outbuildings, framed by umbrella pines and cypresses that articulate the lower terraces and lend give the entrance to the gardens such an undeniably Italian flavour.

But from which Italian source or garden did Cerval get his extravagant ideas for the box topiary? This buxophile planted no less than 150,000 specimens of box on the terraces and more still, to line the drives and paths that lead the visitor from the house to the belvedere, some 2,600ft distant on the tip of the promontory.

Even so, it's not the quantity of plants (although the figure is staggering), but the inventiveness with which Cerval laid out his vast pattern of soft, organic squirls and squiggles, framed by crisp walls embellished with architectural motifs that counts. This is topiary as never seen before—as disorientingly playful as it is seriously splendid.

Elsewhere in the park, Cerval was no less generous in his efforts, rather more typical of garden fashion under



to turn his gaze to Marqueyssac, whose neglect could be witnessed from the ramparts of Castelnaud. Just over a decade later, with the agreement of Cerval's last—and occasionally resident—descendent, M. Rossillon acquired the manor house and garden.

He gave himself just one year to complete the restoration of both buildings and gardens and teams of contractors worked round the clock (quite literally during the final weeks) to meet the deadline.

'It was the first garden I had ever restored,' admits M. Rossillon, 'and my only real contact with gardening had been through my mother and grandmother, who were both keen gardeners. But I immersed myself in 19th-century garden literature and found out all I could about Julien de Cerval in order to be faithful to his ideals and the horticultural spirit of his age.'

Twenty years on, the exuberant squiggles and soft hummocky contours of the topiary garden continue to make visitors' eyes pop with astonishment and the 3,000 new specimens that were planted to fill in the gaps in the original design have blended imperceptibly with their centenarian neighbours. However, despite the evident health of the box here, there is one subject that everybody wants to talk about: the persistent threat of box blight. It's a rather wearisome subject these days, but Jean Lemoussu, the head gardener, responds gravely that, although parts of the garden have been affected, it is kept under control with regular applications of a nettle-based liquid treatment.

Rossillon and Marqueyssac's legion of admirers can all relax. Cerval can relax even more.

*Jardins de Marqueyssac, Vézac, Dordogne, France (00 33 5 53 31 36 36; <http://marqueyssac.com>)*

Napoleon III. Grottoes and waterfalls appeared, bosky groves of cypress were planted and stone steps arranged to lead the visitor through a pleasing Arcadia, furnished with a chapel and resting places, belvederes and architectural focal points, in which stone-built, beehive-shaped huts (a feature of the Périgordan landscape) took the place of Classical temples.

The 20th century took its toll and, by the end of the Second World War, the gardens and park had lost their definition. By the 1970s, Cerval's descendants were still visiting, but could only watch sadly as the overgrowth of 150,000 unclipped box plants crept ever closer and began to overshadow the decaying walls of the house.

Down the river in Beynac, however, another story was starting. A schoolboy from Paris, Kléber Rossillon would spend his holidays in Beynac, where his father was mayor. His parents had bought the ruined Château de Castelnaud on the far side of the river and its slow restoration fired the boy's imagination. Despite con-

tinuing his studies in aeronautical engineering and embarking on a career that eventually saw him working on the Ariane space programme, he couldn't stop returning to Castelnaud. Finally, in 1985, the old fortress was opened to the public and M. Rossillon left the world of rocket science to run it as a business.

Its immediate success enabled him

**Rather than the more familiar rigid formality, the box at Marqueyssac is trained into soft, organic shapes**

## COUNTRY LIFE goes to the Dordogne

**I**N association with Boxwood Tours, COUNTRY LIFE is delighted to announce an exclusive tour from September 19 to 23, enjoying the gastronomy and gardens of this richly fascinating region, hosted by COUNTRY LIFE contributors David Wheeler and Kirsty Fergusson. From our comfortable base at Le Vieux Logis, a member of Relais & Châteaux with a Michelin-starred restaurant, our tailor-made tour explores the Dordogne's varied horticultural gems, frequently in the company of their owners. As well as Marqueyssac, we explore romantic Sardy and the medieval Château de Losse, with its sensitively restored gardens and *château*. Hautefort boasts immaculate formal gardens and Les Jardins du Manoir d'Eyrignac reveal topiary at its best. The Chartreuse du Colombier includes a walled garden, a potager, a Baroque pavilion, avenues and borders full of old roses and traditional flowers.

The cost is £3,325 per person (single supplement: £300), which includes four nights' accommodation at Le Vieux Logis, meals with local wines and return flights from London Gatwick. For more information, visit [www.boxwoodtours.co.uk](http://www.boxwoodtours.co.uk) or telephone 01341 241712.