

A Journey Through Alsace and the Vosges

FOUR GARDENS ON THE FRENCH SIDE OF THE RHINE

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Over lunch, *entre la poire et le fromage*, as they like to say, my French neighbours were enthusiastic when I mentioned I was about to embark on a trip to Alsace and offered the kind of travel advice that I have become accustomed to receiving while living in a country whose regional identities are largely constructed around the pleasures of *terroir* and table: ‘Oh! The choucroute! Yes, sauerkraut. *Mais c’est un must* – what do you mean, you don’t like it? *Oh là là, c’est pas possible . . .* and of course, you’ll have Reisling and you can NOT leave without pairing a Gewürtztraminer with Munster cheese . . . and don’t forget to try a *kugelhopf*. . .’ My British friends listened politely to the litany of gastronomic experience and then, (with equal predictability) offered an alternative response to the region, ‘Hmm: bit of an identity crisis there, perhaps . . . not sure if it’s German or French, although obviously it IS French, er, *now* . . . Oh, come on! Alsace absolutely symbolises what the European Union stands for . . .’ We had swerved onto dangerous territory, and I was still getting funny looks about the sauerkraut, so I mentioned that the purpose of my visit was to look at gardens. This drew a puzzled silence while the table mulled over the prospect of what kind of garden might take root among the gold and green vineyards, the half-timbered houses dripping with red and pink pelargoniums, and the once embattled western banks of the Rhine.

Alain Soulier, chairman of Parcs et Jardins d’Alsace, and designer of lampshades for the happy few, lives not far from the Franco-German border, in the rural northern reaches of Alsace with his partner, Jean-Louis Cura, a landscape designer. Alain explains how the region, with its fluctuating frontiers and populations became – and still is – a melting-pot of cultural influences, inviting – not least, on a horticultural level – originality and personal expression. ‘And long, cold winters to develop ideas!’ Furthermore, he adds,

‘we have some pretty serious plantspeople making gardens here. Even before the renowned plant fair at Courson got going in the Eighties, we had a similar event, at the Lalique Museum just down the road from here, which was a magnet for plant lovers and got us all talking to each other.’ Alain and Jean-Louis’s own half-acre garden, La Ferme Bleue in Uttenhoffen, makes a delightful case in point: it’s not just a highly original garden in which this creative duo have invested much of themselves, it’s a meeting place for convivial Sunday brunches, held in the old barn beside the house, where plants and ideas might be exchanged over the coffee and kugelhopfs. Continuing throughout Advent, these fruitful gatherings are much valued by the wider community, too.

The farmhouse is painted a vivid blue – a blue halfway between old-fashioned lavender and cobalt plumbago, a colour that marries well with the dusty russet and gentle green foliage of early autumn hortensias that cluster at its feet, the blushing pink pelargoniums tumbling from its balcony and window boxes and France’s favourite creamy-pink rose, *Rosa* ‘Pierre de Ronsard’ (‘Eden’ in the UK). Although Alsace is famous for its colourful, half-timbered houses, this blue appears to have been chosen by Swiss Protestants, who settled in the region during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and wished to declare their presence. This striking blue pigment derives from the alum quarries at Bouxwiller, close by. Reviving this tradition, which had fallen out of fashion in the post-war years, (although they had to look to a German paint manufacturer to come up with the right mineral blue) Alain and Jean-Louis caused something of a stir in the village, as other householders followed suit. The reinvention of tradition continues in the garden. Alain grew up in a house that overlooked a garden made by Le Nôtre at the École Militaire at Autun, in Burgundy. It gave him a deep-rooted feeling for structure and balance which is reflected in the clipped formality of the garden behind the barn. Yet for all its box topiary and symmetrical parterres, its bastion of alternating copper and green beech hedging, the mood is contemporary, the planting an eruption of cool blues and pinkish whites; all thought of Le Nôtre subverted by a fabulously laden Christkindel apple tree,

native to the region, and the odd sculptural item fashioned from *objets trouvés* on the farm.

Alain points me southwards towards another artist-gardener, Michelle Schneider, whose deep affection for Japan permeates every aspect of her domestic and creative life. Le Jardin de L'Escalier, like La Ferme Bleue, is intimate in scale and deeply personal – however, this garden is largely devoted to supplying her remarkable kitchen – for Michelle offers Japanese cookery classes and tasting dinners in her late husband's carpentry workshop. Thickly mulched raised beds offer lessons in organic companion planting and among the more traditional leeks and curly kale, nasturtiums, marigolds and borage, she grows staples of Japanese cuisine. Michelle points out daikon radish 'used in almost every Japanese dish', a ginger (*Zingiber mioga*) whose edible flowers are produced *underground*, and the spiny Japanese pepper, *sansho* (*Zanthoxylum piperitum*), prized as much for its delicate spring foliage as for its culinary applications. 'I love the way the Japanese pay such close, such respectful attention to the turn of each season,' murmurs Michelle. 'You'll find a small sprig of *sansho* on your plate before a meal to mark the start of spring.' The apparently jumbled abundance of colourful, extraordinary edible plants contrasts dramatically with the discrete, contemplative space Michelle has organised at the furthest end of the garden, beyond a screen of fruit cages. But time presses and Michelle urges me to continue my journey south of Strasbourg, to see a garden that Alain also has warmly recommended, Le Jardin de Marguerite.

In a quiet village lane of somewhat suburban character, Marguerite Goetz has created one of the most admired gardens on the Alsatian horticultural map. Today, she and her husband, Michel, are surveying their (by no means small) front garden, which this dedicated and adventurous plantswoman decided to dig up and replant two years ago. It is now chock-full of Mediterranean plants, looking – it has to be said – very comfortable, despite the apparent incongruity, in their new surroundings. The climate (hot summers punctuated with heavy rainfall; very cold, relatively dry winters) evidently suits them. Narrow paths thread through an undulating, gravelly landscape where silvery, glaucous perennials and grasses,

santolinas, cistus and dierama, molina, euphorbias and sedums surge about slender spears of juniper and cypress, an olive tree and a terracotta urn or two.

It's now thirty years since Marguerite – inspired by visits to English gardens and possessed of the plantaholic's addiction – first mapped out a sequence of garden rooms from a grassy acre of orchard overlooking arable farmland behind the house. Rare or unusual trees and shrubs, a formidable collection of Old Roses, a potager and stream-fed water garden are united by a broad, meandering grassy path that invites an appreciative notebook pause at every turn. We halt beside an elegant, pyramidal alder (*Alnus glutinosa imperialis*), striking for its deeply cut pinnate foliage, to enjoy its conversation with a neighbouring small lilac (*Syringa afghanica*), equally arresting in its fine-toothed foliage and just starting to reflect the autumn colours of a *Cercidiphyllum japonicum* 'Red Fox'. Although immersed in her love of plants, Marguerite has retained a sharp sense of perspective, avoiding overcrowding and the temptation to fill every empty space with a new rarity. Soothing green glades and controlled views out over wheat fields provide the necessary visual balance.

Alsace is bordered to the west by the Vosges mountains. Vast seams of particularly fine granite lie close to the surface and quarries sprang up all over the western shoulders of the mountain range throughout the late nineteenth and first part of the twentieth centuries. (Next time you're in Paris, consider the humble kerb-stones edging the pavement: more than 90 per cent of them originated in the Vosges). Then the market for Vosgian stone crashed as cheaper granite from Brazil started to flood the market. By the late 1950s the quarrymen were moving out, most of them adopting the policy of smothering the ransacked slopes with dense plantations of Norway spruce: not an obvious place to consider making a garden. Yet, having acquired four acres in the late Seventies, Thierry Dronet shrugged off the task of clear felling three thousand fully-grown conifers and imported some two thousand tons of topsoil. In between wielding the chainsaw and operating a bulldozer to sculpt new contours into the hillside, the energetic young man diverted

streams, created ponds, rearranged boulders and built walls, paths and bridges. When the winters closed in and snow halted work he retreated to his workshop, crafting benches and railings, tree guards and plant supports in wood and iron with which to furnish his new garden, Le Jardin de Berchigranges (see James Foggin in *HORTUS* 117).

But a garden needs plants – and so Thierry found himself making frequent visits to a local nursery specialising in unusual perennials. The nurserywoman was Monique, whose love of colour and design and deep understanding of how to garden in an apparently hostile mountain climate complemented Thierry's boundless energy and vision. Twenty-five years after their first meeting, their delight in the garden they have created together is undimmed. 'Thierry's a crazy man,' laughs Monique, 'and I'm crazy about plants . . . and so each year we plan something else to extend the garden.' Visitors return, year after year, following the twisting road that rises from the valley of the Vologne high up the forested slopes (Berchigranges occupies an east-facing slope at no less than 2,400 ft) to see what new dreams have been turned into reality.

Beyond the delphinium-blue wooden chalet where the Dronets live (blue is Monique's favourite colour), the garden unfolds as a sequence of rooms, each one dominated by a particular colour and theme. An English cottage-style garden filled from spring to autumn with a succession of bulbs and perennials approached through a pergola hung with roses and edged with neatly trimmed box hedging gives way to a sequence of streams and ponds, ferny banks and bog planting where orange and scarlet primulas shelter beneath banks of sky-blue meconopsis. Light comes filtered through the silvery, slender stems of birch and maple, and in late summer, through the swaying plumes of tall grasses. Close cropped turf paths twist and turn, revealing small and secret gardens concealed beneath the high boundary bank or the yew-hedged 'ladies' chamber': a large octagonal enclosure filled with scented plants, offering sublime views over misty, wooded valleys and mountain ridges, purple in the distance.

Summers are brief but intense at Berchigranges, and rainfall

high, ensuring a lush profusion of growth. ‘We have to be aware that many visitors will inevitably visit Berchigranges in the rain,’ says Thierry, ‘so we make a virtue of this by providing sheltered places where you can sit and listen to the patter of summer rain on leaves.’ It’s a beguiling thought that (almost) makes me wish I were not enjoying the late September sunshine. Today, instead of rain, there is the constant sound of water splashing and falling over mossy stones and rushing through narrow streams. The rustle of grasses swaying in the breeze and the hum of insects in the air are pierced by bursts of birdsong in the trembling tree canopy. Butterflies dance above the asters. Yet there’s a chill on the breeze and the possibility of snowfall is only a week or two away. I’m reminded of Alain Soulier’s Advent brunches and the consolations of winter in Alsace where – *entre la poire et le fromage* – gardeners’ imaginations are released from snowbound gardens and take flight in conversation around the table. Originality and self-expression are evidently the fruit.

These gardens, and those mentioned by James Foggin beginning on page 46, are on the itinerary of this autumn’s HORTUS gardens tour of the Alsace region (see page 6). Full details from our long-standing travel associates, Boxwood Tours (mail@boxwoodtours.co.uk).