

Across the Rhine

THREE RIVERINE GARDENS

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It's surprising how the past catches up with you. Thirty years ago I was sitting in a prefabricated classroom with condensation dripping down the single-glazed windows, numb from the emissions of both gas heater and history teacher. The words 'Louis XIV devastated the Palatinate' flitted through the poisoned air, found a crevice in my consciousness, slipped in and built a nest. They've been there ever since. Very occasionally I would chant them quietly to myself, the intervening years having robbed them of all meaning. Until a few months ago when I walked through the gates at Schwetzingen. There I learned that one of the consequences of Louis's devastation of the Palatinate was the existence of the very garden I was visiting.

There has been a castle on the site at Schwetzingen, near Heidelberg, since the fourteenth century. Destroyed during the Thirty Years War, it was rebuilt and destroyed again during Louis's devastation. What we see today is the result of works undertaken during the middle of the eighteenth century after the Treaty of Rijswijk relieved Louis of his territories on the right bank of the Rhine. Carl Theodor, Prince Elector of the Palatinate, chose Schwetzingen as his summer retreat where he could discard his robes of office and take on the role of patron of the arts, a true Prince of the Enlightenment.

His first gardener, Johann Ludwig Petri, mirrored the semicircle formed by the north and south wings of the palace with a semi-circular pergola, creating a giant ring within which *parterres de broderie* were laid out according to the fashion of the day. This is the only circular baroque parterre in Europe. On the threshold of the garden stand four urns depicting the four Ages of Mankind. The Golden Age is represented by horticultural scenes; indicating how Carl Theodor wished his endeavours in the gardens at Schwetzingen to be viewed.

Beyond the great circle, straddling the central axis leading to the lake, are the bosquets. Here Petri laid out hedged enclosures containing trees and shrubs. Despite being extremely formal in its layout, this area is also known as the Wilderness and was intended as a place of private contemplation, a contrast to the very open, very public *parterres de broderie*.

When Petri left Schwetzingen, his replacement, Nicolas de Pigage, completed Petri's designs and augmented them with a new orangerie, the delightful Bath House complex with its neighbouring Aviary and trompe l'oeil Perspective, an outdoor theatre and a menagerie. But by the final quarter of the eighteenth century the craze for landscaping had reached continental Europe. Carl Theodor was as keen as any potentate to possess the perfect landscape but he wasn't prepared to destroy the garden he had already built. Also he didn't have anyone on hand who could design such a landscape. So he sent one of his own gardeners, Friedrich Ludwig von Sckell, to England to learn.

Von Sckell returned in 1777 and the final phase of development at Schwetzingen began. The *Arborem Theodoricum*, a collection of specimen trees intended for the study of botany, was von Sckell's first essay on the subject of landscape gardening and supposedly influenced by 'Capability' Brown's Grecian Valley at Stowe. Von Sckell skilfully modelled a narrow strip of land, concealing the incapacabilities of the site, and providing a suitable setting for the Temple of Botany and a ruined Roman aqueduct. This was followed by a swathe of artfully wooded landscape capping the western end of the estate. Among the trees are numerous temples and statues and an exuberant mosque, the largest of its kind in the world.

And there the story of the garden's development comes largely to an end. Carl Theodor inherited the Electorship of Bavaria and decamped to Munich. Von Sckell went with him, later designing the *Englischer Garten*, one of the best known landmarks of that city. Back at Schwetzingen, the lake was given a more natural looking edge but the gardeners' aims switched from progress to stasis. In the twentieth century the techniques used for maintenance and preservation at Schwetzingen became a model for the care of ancient

monuments throughout Germany. This foresight and thoroughness means visitors to Schwetzingen continue to enjoy a unique mix of garden styles on a princely scale.

About twenty miles north of Schwetzingen lies the Sichtungsgarten or Trials Garden Hermannshof in the town of Weinheim in one of the warmest regions in Germany. Bought by the Freudenberg family in 1888, the garden was soon filled with botanical treasures. The family moved out of the villa in the 1970s which was then taken over by the Freudenberg Corporation as a conference centre. There was talk of bulldozing the entire estate and building something new but the family stepped in and saved the garden. A committee of learned persons was formed and charged with producing a plan for the continued use of the garden. One of the members of the committee was Professor Richard Hansen, founder of the famous university teaching garden at Weihenstephan. It is therefore no surprise that the committee proposed a didactic purpose for the reborn Hermannshof. In contrast to traditional trials grounds, where single species were planted out for assessment, the Hermannshof was to trial combinations of plants chosen for their ability to tolerate certain growing conditions. The experience gained was to be made available to both commercial horticulture and the gardening public. Entrance to the garden was to be free. The gates opened in 1983.

The garden is compact (seven acres) and absolutely crammed with plants. The framework is provided by the trees, many of which were planted in the late nineteenth century by the Freudenbergs, some even older including an Oriental Plane from 1770. Near the main building is an enormous common myrtle grown from Helene Freudenberg's bridal wreath in 1879. While the trees and shrubs are certainly impressive, and impressively labelled, it is the herbaceous planting which really holds one's attention. The directors of the trials have created numerous habitats including Woodland Edge, Water's Edge, Mediterranean Scrubland and Steppe and Dry Prairie. Most of the herbaceous beds are covered in a deep, gravel mulch which is not only good for the plants and soil but also lends a pleasing informal air to the garden, blurring the boundary between

pathway and border. The work in the beds has been meticulously noted over many years, allowing the gardeners to calculate exactly how many minutes per square yard are required for a particular planting. Several of these plantings have enjoyed considerable commercial success after being made available as off-the-peg solutions for municipal and private planting schemes where low maintenance is a priority. The garden is a living database, full of ideas. In recent years I have often refrained from visiting gardens with pad, pencil and camera, having become aware that while furiously scribbling and clicking I was actually missing the whole point of the garden, namely its atmosphere. However, the Hermannshof is one garden where a pad and pencil is an absolute must. We all have areas of our own gardens offering challenging conditions. The Hermannshof offers solutions by the bucket. And all of this is financed by a company which made a fortune selling mops.

Travelling south for about a hundred and fifty miles brings you to the *Markgräflerland* in the south-western corner of Germany. This warm, hilly, wine-growing region lies in the Rhine Valley between the Black Forest and the Vosges mountains. It extends to the gates of Freiburg in the north and Switzerland in the south where the city of Basle straddles the Rhein Knie or Knee of the Rhine. Much of the landscape here is given over to vineyards and for many Germans from unpleasant, industrial areas, the Markgräflerland is the destination of choice for boozy gastro-holidays. You see them grinning in helmets as they surge up hills on electric bicycles. There are other forms of agriculture here too. Nestling among fields of sweetcorn are the gardens at Landhaus *Ettenbühl*. It sounds like a country estate but it's actually a former farmstead which was bought in the 1970s by Dr Alfred Seidel and his wife Gisela, an admirer of English gardens. The couple had built a clinic in a nearby town and the farm provided vegetables and chickens for its kitchen. As a bit of light relief they began planting trees on the exposed, bare site and gradually, over the following decades, a garden was made. By the end of the 1990s with the clinic sold and retirement thrust upon them, the Seidels opened the gardens to the public, partly to pay for the maintenance but, I suspect, primarily

to provide an outlet for their abundant energy.

A keen collector of Old Roses, Gisela Seidel enticed the legendary British nurseryman John Scarman to set up a nursery at Ettenbühl and improve the planting in the gardens. This he did with considerable élan and within a very few years Ettenbühl was established as a major attraction, pulling in garden lovers from all over Germany, Switzerland and France. Alfred Seidel died at the end of 2018 but the trees he planted still form the backbone of the garden. Roses play a major role but there is also a fine collection of tree peonies, a charming potager and extensive herbaceous eruptions to extend the season of interest. In recent years the enthusiasm and good sense of head gardener James Frank and his partner Silke Hegewald can be seen in their fresh new planting schemes, burgeoning, pot-grown rarities and an innovative approach to maintaining plant health.

Gisela Seidel, always a force to be reckoned with in wellingtons and a sou'wester, also turned her attention to those necessary appendages to any modern garden, the restaurant and shop. Sporting an extensive collection of ancient teapots and more or less matching cups, the restaurant at Ettenbühl has become a cult venue for teatime-loving foreigners. A rather tedious tribe when discussing the time required for steeping a teabag, they can be rendered speechless by a plate of cakes from Ettenbühl's kitchen.

These gardens, and those mentioned by Kirsty Fergusson beginning on page 40, 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).