



A general view of the garden with a reclining figure at the head of the pond, backed with a low hedge of *Erica erigena*.

The garden at the Villa Noailles

The following article, first published in *The Garden*¹ in 1977, is one of the few records of this exceptional garden and was written by **PAUL MILES** who stayed with the Vicomte de Noailles several times. Paul died in June 2017 and the article stands in tribute to his love of the Society and contribution to horticulture.

In an age of small and often graceless gardens it is heartening to find a growing awareness of the importance of earlier examples and different styles, so many of which have had a strong influence on the work of later garden makers.

It is noticeable too that many of the finest gardens in the world have been made by amateurs, not all of them wealthy, but all with freedom from commercial horticultural pressures, a keen eye for a plant or grouping of

: ¹ *The Garden* Vol. 102, pt 9 September 1977, reproduced here by kind permission of the Editor.

plants, a knowledge of the history of garden design, and an immediate grasp and understanding of perspective and proportions.

This combination of freedom and awareness has often produced the most original and enchanting effects.

Take for example, the gardens of Hidcote Manor in Gloucestershire, and La Serre de la Madonne in the Val du Gorbio above Nice in the south of France. Both were made by Lawrence Johnston and are completely different in setting and design. Of Johnston little is known (except that he was born in Paris), which is surprising for a man whose gardens became world famous.

Other gardens which are examples of the work of amateurs are Sissinghurst Castle Garden, Mount Stewart garden and that of Tintinhull House, and while they also contain good collections of plants, they are not what I term 'collectors gardens' where the plants come before the design.

It has always been my interest to search for the key to a garden, not just to the garden gate but to what it was that acted as the inspiration for a particular design or combination of plants within it.

At Grasse in the Alpes-Maritimes, there is a garden which contains many original ideas and a number of features inspired in subtle ways by things seen in other places. It was created by an amateur with just that flair and knowledge which single out this garden. It is the garden of the Villa Noailles which has been the winter home of Monsieur le Vicomte de Noailles since shortly after his marriage in the early 1920s. Gardeners are well known for their generosity with plants and ideas and in a series of conversations Monsieur le Vicomte kindly told me the story of his enchanting and exciting garden set on a hillside, which reminded me of Coleridge's lines – 'and there were gardens bright with sinuous rills where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree'.

Soon after the First World War the Noailles were engaged in building a modern house at Hyères (with a striking garden which became well known) on a piece of land which had been a wedding present. One April a year or two later, while visiting relatives in Grasse, a friend told them of a little old house nearby which was to be auctioned off on the following day.

They went to look at it and found it to be a modest eighteenth-century villa which had been uninhabited for 60 to 80 years. There was an ample supply of water from a culvert cut 52 m into the hillside, but the entrance courtyard pool and narrow canals were in poor repair. Rain flowed into the house too, but the setting was attractive with a long view to the south west, and they bought it.

Each year when visiting Grasse the restoration of the house continued, and shortly before the Second World War a double staircase was added to the existing balcony, because, like so many eighteenth-century houses, there was no connection between the house and garden: 'one looked at one's garden from the window'. During the war, the house at Hyères was used as a children's hospital which later claimed a lease and the house was only recovered with some difficulty. Attention was therefore turned towards Grasse which was



The terraces below the main terrace are scattered with olive trees of good proportion.

less warm but has good though alkaline soil and where the supply of water, 100 m³ per day, was the starting point of several innovations.

On the main terrace there was an eighteenth-century circular pool, flanked by a pair of cypresses, and on terraces below with a scattering of olive trees of good proportions. These were left, with the exception of those on three terraces where vegetables have been tried, as have roses, which failed.

Below, there the meadow was rented to a farm tenant who kept sheep which tidies up any bulbs or plants that were put in, with the exception of the native, *Narcissus tazetta*.

One of the first pieces of terrace to be taken into the garden was to the north where an octagonal pool is enclosed by hedges of myrtles and beds of iris with a garden house of sweet bay (*Laurus nobilis*) containing a stone table with a pot of hart's tongue fern (*Phyllitis scolopendrium*) on it, and seats behind. It is on the site of a large rubbish bin because there was no refuse collection in the early days, and it is interesting to note that initially arbutus was tried as it thrives at Hyères.

This part of the garden is reached from the Villa by a narrow terrace which runs from the entrance courtyard with a tiny rivulet. This emerges from walls of tufa with flanking niches containing statues and trickles to a pool under the protective canopy of a carefully manicured lime tree which comes into leaf late. In the winter this courtyard is set out with pots of *Sarcococca ruscifolia*, *Pittosporum tobira* which lends itself well to trimming, common box (*Buxus sempervirens*) and *Hedera helix* 'Goldheart'. *Magnolia grandiflora* does well here and provides shelter for the later flowering things—the narcissus of mainly cream and white flowered sorts, camellias, tree peonies and *Garrya elliptica* trained on the Villa wall. There are also pots of *Loropetalum chinense* with a heady cloying fragrance which lingers below a large eighteenth-century stone tank full of villainous black carp.

A holm oak screens the greenhouse between a pair of almond trees,

which in February are in full blossom against a blue sky. Here the path leads past rows of Parma violets, irises, carnations and arum lilies which are in a protected frame for use as pot plants in the Villa. As a screen there is a wire mesh fence covered in *Hedera* 'Canariensis Variegata'—a 'fedge', and highly attractive one too.

One level down the path from the courtyard one enters an enchanted bower roofed with banksian rose with little shelves of water, where there was once a modest washing trough, and fountains suggested by a visit to the Terrace of a Hundred Fountains of the Villa d'Este at Tivoli south of Rome. Here the obelisks and fleur de lys which adorn them are carved from tufa and have a light coating of *Helxine soleirolii* and *Adiantum venustum*. In order to hide the iron framework which supports the roof of the bower the irons have been encased in split giant bamboo—'an idea of the cook'.

From here the path leads on under a series of pleached judas trees (*Cercis siliquastrum*) arranged in a set of four red flowered to one white, four red repeating along the length of it. This was an idea of Russell Page who felt that to alternate the colours would be too commonplace.

Having so many terraces it became necessary to balance the offside, and hence there are many different hedges. Yews enclose a parallel bed full of tree peonies—two of each sort, never more, to make it more interesting—and to protect them from the wind.

Here there is a splendid fountain in the form of a column. Water from a jet at its head runs round the sides in a descending spiral to fill a pool at its foot.

Enquiry revealed that it is a half size copy of one of the two columns, at the Villa Aldobrandini at Frascati near Rome, and is based on working drawings sent by Prince Clementi Aldobrandini and translated into concrete drainpipe sections, decorated with a flower design alternating with diamonds made of stone not unlike Blue John in texture which was brought from an old quarry, since abandoned. The column stands in front of a *Cedrus atlantica pendula*, one of the few examples of this conifer here.

The retaining wall of the terrace above is clasped by plants of prostrate rosemary below a thick hedge, and between this and the grass walk above are mixed borders which replaced borders of irises which were delightful for a fortnight but caused a lot of work. Now they contain such plants as *Sycopsis sinensis*, a neglected evergreen shrub or small tree which does well on alkaline soils and was introduced from central China by E. H. Wilson in 1901. It has clusters of yellow, red-anthered stamens, not unlike hamamelis.

Two pavilions mark the outer corners of the terrace where they are set back from the edge of the wall and have a slightly Chinese feeling in the design of the roofs, giving them movement and charm. The interior of one is decorated in the Moorish manner, the other became a wine cellar which the Villa lacked.

In this area, between the fountain terrace and side entrance to the garden, below the staircases, is a stepped court of granite sets where, growing close

to a fountain and small pool, are clumps of day lily, the stems of which have adventitious roots at the nodes. Nearby is a good clump of *Helleborus* 'Prince Rupert' which has a generous speckling of red on a background of white petals.

From here it is a short step to the circular pool below the balcony, beneath which is a tiled and sheltered sitting area, flanked by box-edged beds of *Scilla peruviana*, with *Holboellia latifolia* and *Akebia quinata* winding through the balusters above to perfume the air. One's eye is drawn into a triangular room with walls of box where a thin jet of water plays onto the surface of a stone table and splashes gently into a cushion of *Helxine soleirolii*.

A turn to the north and the visitor emerges through a box arch, a feat of horticultural engineering, onto a balcony with a long view down the peony border, and a side view through a window cut from the hedge.

Originally there were four plane trees and some box bushes on the terrace which had been cut back hard. Removal of the trees allowed more box to be planted to correct the shape of the terrace, and formation of the ante chamber and balcony. Now the pediment of the arch is to be grown forward for box lends itself well to such architectural treatment and shadows add to the definition of the moulding.

On the opposite side of the Villa, a diagonally quartered garden is shaded by *Magnolia delavayi* which flourishes here in Grasse and looks down on beds of *Erica carnea* 'Sprinwood White' centred on a glazed pot of rosemary. This essentially white garden was inspired by visits to Sissinghurst.

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Below the Villa, to the south west, a further series of terraces unfold. Every gardener with a lime soil wishes to grow calcifuge plants, and here the terraces include some where the lime soil has been replaced with acid earth which house a selection of camellias, rhododendrons and a vast *Corylopsis spicata*.

Xanthoceras sorbifolia is happy enough on lime and at one time the tiny leaves were snipped out of the flowers—a task of great patience and love. Other specimens here include *Heteromeles arbutifolia*, the Christmas berry of the Californians, by a stone pyramid below another stone table, this with a central column of water which provides a fringed tablecloth draining into a pool beneath. I had often wondered about the shape of the pyramid, and finally had the courage to ask about its proportions. Amusingly enough it had been bought from a dealer in antique objects near the Gulf des Mougins some years before. Last year however, Monsieur le Vicomte received a letter from a young man who said 'I hear that you have bought my grandfather's tomb!' And so it is—there is now a wooden trap door where the plaque would have been and enquiry has revealed that it was the tomb of a general who fell in the Napoleonic Wars.

Further on is a new circular pool inspired by the one at Hidcote. This has trees behind it in the same way (at Hidcote hedges enclose it) and a few branches are being encouraged to come forward, leaving the front free of shade for water lilies. It, too, is a round pond which you cannot walk all



Yew hedges enclose a parallel bed of tree peonies with a fountain in the form of a column. The two pavilions have a slightly Chinese feeling.

the way around, with *Osmanthus aurantiacus* at the side, olives, *Rhamnus alaternus* 'Argenteovariegata', and *Pittosporum tenuifolium* 'Silver Queen' behind. *Kniphofia* 'Zululandii' contrast with giant fennel (*Ferula tingitana*) while *Jasminum polyanthum* covers the wall, and a clump of *Beschorneria yuccoides* stands aloof and slightly to one side.

We are now below the octagonal pond in the Bear's Garden (part of the Noailles crest) and a second lime-free section provides shelter for *Magnolia mollicomata* with a carpet of pernettyas; *Stachyurus praecox* thrives near camellias with a blanket of *Pachysandra terminalis* at its feet.

Against a wall above, *Buddleja officinalis* provides a soft background while *Hesperaloe parviflora* var. *engelmannii* marks the upward note of a flight of steps near a plant of *Urginea maritima*, the fleshy glaucous green sea onion of the Mediterranean region.

Below this interrelated series of beds and terraces lies the Prairie—the meadow between the lower terrace and natural stream which runs like a cord of molten silver around the lower boundary. But there is another narrow terrace to pause and consider first. This was a testing piece to lay out because it is so narrow and can only be entered from one end, and the path leads to a seat under a tall *Umbellularia californica*. In the centre of the terrace were two olive trees, and it was decided that the terrace should house an alabaster column bought at a sale in Paris in 1925. It stood for a while at Hyères where it supported a Brancusi head, but transported here did not look well on the

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Part of the garden created at his winter residence, the Villa Noailles above Grasse in France, by the Vicomte de Noailles (1891 – 1981). The Vicomte, was an early member of the International Dendrology Society and its fifth President.



The octagonal pool enclosed by hedges of myrtle, with a garden house of *Laurus nobilis*.

terrace until it was sited between the trunks of the olive trees where it balances the length of the terrace perfectly. With quiet, uncomplicated patches of oxalis and *Vinca minor* it is a delightful corner to sit and contemplate the variety of design ideas and plants to be seen from it.

The north end of the Prairie, beyond a small vegetable garden and enclosed by hedges of *Euonymus japonicus* 'Microphyllus', a path runs between pairs of *Wisteria sinensis*, grown as short standards and edged with *Bergenia crassifolia*—three contrasting foliages and shades of green.

If we follow the path through an aviary intended for free flying budgerigars, we reach a small garden house in which we can sit and look up to the Villa, over a pool with three fountains designed as the setting for a voluptuous reclining figure. It

is backed by a low hedge of *Erica erigena* (*E. mediterranea*) and near it a side way leads down past a rock bank of hellebores, by a Japanese dipping cup with clacks a warning and draws the eye to a large mandrake (*Mandragora officinarum*), reminding the visitor that according to old Greek gardening law mandrakes are supposed to scream when pulled up, driving the hearer insane.

Along the lower edge of the Prairie are planted several magnolias and flowering cherries, including an immense *Magnolia kobus* obtained from Moerheim Nurseries in 1949 (all of the principal specimens bear their source and date of planting), *Magnolia soulangeana* 'Alexandrina' with purple flushed white flowers, and *Prunus yedoensis* 'Pendula' grown on a clean trunk, 5 m high and trained out to form a tall umbrella which provides a patch of much needed shade in high summer, as well as providing a bead curtain of flowers in the spring. Finally we return, past pools edged with kingcups and irises, towards the Villa.

It is hard to capture the spirit of this unique garden which is full of original ideas and where one is never far from the sound of running water. Not overstuffed with plants, it contains a large variety, each carefully chosen for their individual contribution and planted sparingly by a disciplined hand. It has been the amusement of a highly observant and gifted amateur gardener whose faultless touch will be an inspiration for generations to come.