

Living the Mediterranean dream

Filippi Nursery and Gardens, Languedoc, France

Louisa Jones admires a remarkable garden and nursery that were partially inspired by Beth Chatto, but made in the sunnier, dependably arid landscapes of the Midi

Photographs by Clive Nichols

OLIVIER and Clara Filippi, gardening in the Languedoc region of France, take inspiration from the Mediterranean garrigue and maquis landscapes: vast stretches of ancient pasture and scrubland with poor, rocky, shallow soil. For decades, they have been exploring all over the Mediterranean rim, rambling in their camper van from Sardinia to Andalusia, from the Atlas mountains to the Peloponnese.

By observing not only species but whole ecosystems—sometimes insects as well as flora—they have evolved a garden style that is ecological, economical and good-looking all year round. Thus, their own garden, a private extension of the nursery grounds, provides endless fascination from season to season.

Garrigue gardening is attractive to home gardeners because it makes good use of conditions often viewed as handicaps—in particular, poor soil and summer drought. But these plantings must also resist spring floods, sudden variations of temperature and violent storms, although the most essential ingredient is good drainage in the soil. When the Filippis began making their garden in 1993, they took inspiration from Beth Chatto's then new, and much talked-about, gravel garden, near Colchester, Essex.

Between their newly built house and the sea was a flat area of slightly less than an acre. On it, they created favourable conditions for typical garrigue plants by adding and mounding sand and gravel, creating permeable volumes and slopes and using paths for run-off. The Filippis don't recommend mulching with compost or green manures as they make the soil too rich and may induce rot. The plants are gently layered, from carpeting ground covers to subshrubs, among taller groups and small trees (such as cypress, olive and almond). The result, rounded and spreading like waves, provides a perfect foreground for views of the oyster beds of the town of Sète, which lies beyond.



Above: Olivier Filippi among his nursery stock. Right: The garrigue garden of drought-tolerant Mediterranean species

Olivier finds that gravel suppresses many weeds, but allows the plants that thrive in it to self-sow, producing interesting new combinations and a natural look. Among the Filippi specialties are euphorbias, asphodels, *Cistus* spp., *Stachys*, santolinas, artemisias, rosemaries and, particularly, *Phlomis*, of which they have one of the world's best collections. In the beginning, they included plants from similar climate zones all over the world (such as California and South Africa), but, today, they limit themselves to actual Mediterranean flora and cultivars thereof.

When you look at a true garrigue landscape, you discover that its characteristically tight mounds of plants have evolved over generations, from wind stress and grazing sheep. The gardener uses shears to achieve >



it, and upkeep of this style is minimal, mainly consisting of a light pruning twice a year. But there are many opportunities to engage with natural dynamics. For instance, a carpet of *Euphorbia myrsinites* might begin to spread itself; they might allow it to do so, or perhaps keep just a swath, a green river among contrasting foliage.

The Filippis' nursery, however, is managed with military precision. The decision to avoid all chemicals means constant monitoring of temperature, hygrometry and ventilation all day, every day, to create conditions plants love and pests hate. Recently, the couple's experiments have involved insect populations interacting with plants. They now propagate and sell sticky fleabane (*Dittrichia viscosa*) for local olive growers because this common weed hosts a predator of the Mediterranean fruit fly.

‘The Filippis have developed a style that is ecological, economical and good-looking all year round’

In the past few years, the Filippis have been experimenting with different kinds of open spaces. Three main types have evolved. The first is what Olivier calls his ‘combat lawn’, planted with grandchildren in mind. He mixes low-growing ‘thug’ species and lets the best one win, observing the struggle for domination with interest. The second is a kind of ‘cobblestone’ garden. In the many abandoned villages the couple has encountered in remote Mediterranean regions, they find that the stone paving of paths and threshing floors attracts certain types of plant. They closely observe what species like these conditions and, again, imitate the landscape at home. They start off with a harmonious mix of carpeting plants such as thymes, add dwarf rosemaries for cascade shapes, and sub-shrubs that, when brushed against, release their scent.

Thirdly, there is a steppe garden, inspired by the mountain pastures of Morocco, which are cold and windswept; their subsoil is largely mineral, with only a light layer of seasonal vegetation. Bulbs including the autumn-flowering *Sternbergia* and saffron crocuses do well in the ‘steppe’. In spring, a small *Achillea* tends to dominate before disappearing in summer.

All three of these areas can be walked on and need minimal upkeep. And all three evolve through the seasons. The combat lawn is watered once a month from a buried reservoir that catches rainwater from the roof; the stone garden benefits from the moisture trapped under the mineral mulch. The steppe garden is never watered, but is mainly dormant in summer.



Above left: The rosy pink flowers of *Stachys cretica*. Above right: *Lavandula dentata* Adrar M’Korn, from the mountains of Morocco. Below: Ruffled petals of *Cistus x cyprius*

These are family gardens, experimental testing grounds and, on occasion, demonstration gardens for clients. The labelling of stock is precise and extensive; for example, there are 25 different shrubby germanders (*Teucrium spp.*) with pink, blue or white flowers. Most people appreciate the Mediterranean flora best in spring, when garrigue plants, shrubs, perennials and bulbs are in full flower. But Olivier and Clara like it in winter, when the shapes and volumes are most clearly defined and the light is brilliant.

‘Natural’ landscape gardening is now a global trend and, at its best, it celebrates the specifically local character of each place, each plot, however small, throughout the day and the year.

Pépinière Filippi is at RD 613 34140 Méze, France (00 33 4 67 43 88 69; www.jardin-sec.com). ‘The Dry Gardening Handbook’ by Olivier Filippi (Thames & Hudson, 2008)



Two exquisite *Cistus x argenteus* cultivars: *Stripey* (left) and *Blushing Peggy Sammons* (right)



Above left: Canary-yellow *Cistus x tardiflorens*, a hybrid of *C. halimifolius* and *C. atriplicifolius*. Above: *Marrubium incanum* has felty, attractively saw-toothed grey leaves and whorls of white flowers clustered round the stem. Right: Flower stems of *Salvia candelabrum* can achieve some 3ft in height, rising out of rosettes of grey-green woolly foliage similar to that of culinary sage. Below: The flowers of *Phlomis purpurea* subsp. *almeriensis* appear in rosy whirls

Join COUNTRY LIFE in Provence

Louisa Jones will be hosting an exclusive COUNTRY LIFE tour to Provence in association with the garden travel specialist, Boxwood Tours, from April 24 to 29, enjoying the gastronomy and gardens of this fortunate region. Our tailor-made tour explores old country estates and *bastides* of the Alpilles and Luberon, many of which have been reinvigorated in recent years by designers of international reputation. Timed for late April, it sees the Mediterranean spring coloured by cascades of banksia roses and bee-foraged tresses of wisteria. Highlights include the elegant and diverse St Rémy gardens of Pierre Bergé, lifelong companion of Yves Saint Laurent; the remarkable cliff-top garden of La Carmejane, with its spectacular sweeping views; Les Confines, home of Dominique Lafourcade; the renowned Filippi nursery and garden described here; a stylish masterpiece of the late Nicole de Vesian; and the glorious estate of Petit Fontanille, part of which was remodelled by Rosemary Verey. Most of the gardens of the tour are accessible only with Miss Jones. This unique event is based in the supremely comfortable 18th-century mansion of La Mirande, in the heart of old Avignon. Prices from £3,890 per person, including Heathrow flights.

For more information please contact Boxwood Tours, Rhiw, Llanbedr, Gwynedd, LL45 2NT (01341 241717; mail@boxwoodtours.co.uk; www.boxwoodtours.com)

