Around the World in 80 Gardens

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Extract

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PHOENIX

Northern Europe

Choosing seven or eight gardens to represent the whole of Northern Europe was always going to be a tricky, if not absurd, proposition. I could easily have done the entire eighty gardens there and still have some to spare. But the guiding principal of this whole venture was that it was personal, biased and only definitive insofar as it seemed a good idea at the time. By definition my mind would be altered if not changed by completing the journey.

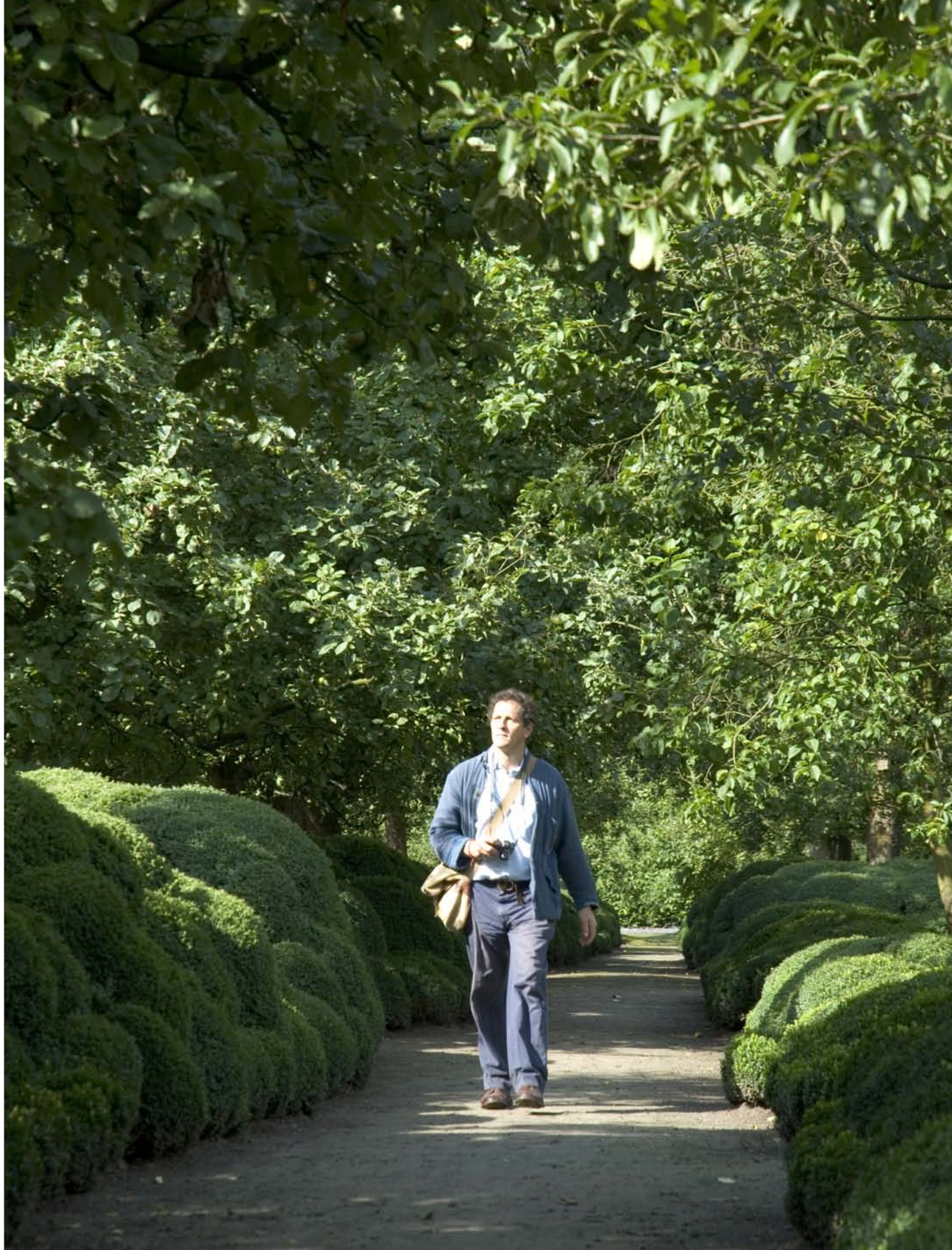
I thought of including my own garden on the grounds that this is where all my horticultural journeys begin and end, but decided that it was a wasted opportunity to visit somewhere that I had never seen before. In the end I rationed it severely: two gardens only in England, two in France, my long time hero Jacques Wirtz's garden in Belgium, two gardens in the Netherlands and the northernmost botanic garden in the world, 200 miles inside the Arctic Circle in Norway. It would be a mixture of gardens that I knew and was eager to revisit and those that I had long wished to see.

It seemed to me that there was a pattern to trace. Gardening, as part of artistic popular culture, is extraordinarily strong in Northern Europe and is founded upon a garden history that goes back over 300 years. There are literally hundreds of historic gardens that one can visit and millions of people do just that every year. Personal history or, most intoxicating of all, 'celebrity' inevitably pulls the crowds. Sissinghurst is justifiably renowned for its extraordinary beauty and expertise but I reckon that it would not draw half the visitors that it does without the shade of Vita Sackville West falling over it. How many of the garden visitors have read a word of her work? Would half a million people a year visit Giverny if it had been created by an anonymous bank clerk rather than Claude Monet?

Yet historic gardens that have no such powerful ghosts still attract vast figures. There is clearly a common desire to touch, smell and walk through the past via the medium of a garden. Gardens that have not been altered in anything but minutest detail over hundreds of years bring the past alive in the most vivid way possible because, unlike a building or a painting, the components are alive only in the intense present.

There is an overriding paradox in the maintenance of all such historic gardens. How do you hold them still, locked in the specific time that they commemorate and yet still maintain the vitality and constantly shifting life of plants that is inevitable in any kind of garden and, more than that, an essential part of any garden's attraction?

I waited until midsummer to visit these gardens on the basis that this would probably be the best time to see gardens in Northern Europe, but it happened to be the wettest, dullest year in living memory. I have never visited a garden anywhere or at any time without someone telling me that it would look better had my visit been last or next week. But on this trip that was almost certainly true, except when I got up to Tromsø, inside the Arctic Circle.



Above *Jaques Wirtz and I sat for hours discussing his garden. His enthusiasm and love for his garden, and his work, is inspirational.*
Opposite *Waterlilies and* Equisetum *fill the pond, whilst irises are massed in the surrounding beds and another low box hedge divides this part of the garden from the house.*

In 1970 the family moved to the gardener's house of a great estate with an old walled garden of some 4 acres to garden in. When they arrived this was almost entirely derelict apart from some mature fruit trees and the remnants of box hedging. Finding these, Jacques did not impose a preconceived plan but went with it and used this raw material, transforming the garden into one of the most recognisable and idiosyncratic in the world.

The garden is set back from the road and surrounded by a tall beech wood, giving it a completely green backdrop. You are met with his trademark impeccably clipped hornbeam hedges (I confess that my own garden is measured out in hornbeam entirely influenced by Jacques Wirtz) screening the house. There is a lot of clipping in a Wirtz garden (the box hedges alone take two people six weeks to cut) but, I was firmly told, always with an electric hedge cutter if possible or by hand, never with a petrol-driven machine. These green walls make spaces of monastic quiet and calm.

I was nervous about meeting him. As one always is with heroes. As a rule it is a disappointment but not this time. He is a tall, benign, smiling man and incredibly active and sprightly for someone in their mid-eighties. He still works every day on new projects, and still loves his own garden with the excitement and passion he had when he came nearly forty years ago. The house is modest but beautiful inside and out. Breakfast on the lawn, white tablecloth and perfect manners, clean spaces filled with light inside. All is modest and restrained and yet wholly relaxed.

The garden is an irregular rectangle divided into four by paths flanked with the famous astonishing cloud pruned box hedges. Jacques told me that this was simply a practical way of dealing with old hedges that had become so shaded and overgrown that they consisted of individual, lanky bushes with gaps between them. By clipping them with the existing curves and undulations he encourage them to grow together to make a sinuous form that is billowingly beautiful. Half of the quarter nearest to the house might be called a conventional garden, with a lawn, borders, pond and greenhouse and there is a hidden garden in another quarter but the rest is given up to nursery stock planted in informal beds. This description does no service to it at all. For a start you are hardly aware of any of this. Other than the quartering paths the whole seems to be a seamless whole. Yet it is quite unlike anything you are likely to have experienced before. It has the clipped formality of Villandry, yet as unostentatiously as possible – rather as though one has stumbled upon an attic full of beautiful, yet slightly forgotten, objects or into a sculptor's studio filled with work in various stages of completion.

There are clipped yews, hollies, some so huge that they can only be trimmed from vast cranes. There is a sense of *Alice through the Looking Glass* here – everything is familiar but strangely so. Things are bigger, more trimmed and clipped and yet more wild than one is used to. Parts of the garden are like a quarry with blocks of green standing waiting to be carved. The bubbling curves of the cloud hedges and the clipped shapes beyond them in every direction shape the spaces between the plants, sculpting the green air.

I SPENT TWO DAYS IN THE GARDEN AND NEVER TOUCHED A MOMENT OF LESS THAN WONDER AND DELIGHT.

Dos Talas

Buenos Aires, Argentina

FROM RIO, I FLEW SOUTH to Argentina. Sitting by a window I gazed through the clear sky as we crossed a vast open space of pampas over Uruguay until we crossed the River Plate and came down in Buenos Aires. Buenos Aires is very different to Rio. It is a big, open city with broad, leafy avenues reminiscent of Madrid or Paris. It feels familiar yet exciting and fresh. One of the men responsible for creating the way that Buenos Aires looks was a Frenchman, Charles Thays. Born in Paris in 1849 and trained as a landscape architect, he visited Argentina when he was forty and decided to live there. He was appointed Director of 'Parks and Walkways' in 1891 and almost single-handedly shaped the way that the city looks today.

I spent a day in the city walking round and visiting Thays' parks, adjusting to very different atmosphere, climate and culture from Brazil. Tango dancers rehearsed in the park moving with a mannered exactness that was almost like tai-chi. A dog walker went confidently by with no less than fourteen dogs of every shape and size attached to him by leads. Best of all was the mind boggling vast gomero in St Paul's Square that was planted by Thays. With flanged buttresses to its trunks that splayed out into fins and lateral trunks that would not have shamed the trunk of a 500-year old oak tree, it is an astonishing, miraculous living thing.

But what I wanted to see was Thays' work outside Buenos Aires, in one of the estancias or ranches out in the pampas. So, after breakfast the next day, I piled into a minibus with the film crew and set out for the 125-mile drive to Dos Talas.

Dos Talas is one of over 800 estancias in Argentina and although it is representative of the type, it also has particularly superb gardens that were designed by Charles Thays in 1908. The house was built by one Pedro Luro who had a general store in the small town of Dolores. An estancia owner gave him the job of planting a eucalyptus forest on his land, offering a price per tree and then leaving for Europe. When he returned a few years later he found that Pedro Luro had planted so many trees that he could only pay him by handing over a portion of the estate – some 42,000 acres – which became the future Dos Talas. Pedro Luro left the estate to his daughter Agustina who commissioned Buenos Aires' top landscape architect – who was of course Charles Thays – to design a 75 acre park to accompany a new house that she had had built.

The garden that Thays designed had a maze, rose gardens, a vast walled kitchen garden, boating lake and sixteen gardeners to tend it. The estancia is now reduced to a mere 3,500 acres of which Luis Elizalde farms a third and looks after the garden. It is much reduced in circumstances but is still in the same family and still, apparently, a splendid example of an estancia.

When we arrived, we drove down a long avenue of dead elms, bleached like bones in the southern sun. They are an amazing, purely sculptural sight. Approaching the house there is a whole pig roasting on an open wood fire beneath a large cedar of Lebanon. Argentina – indeed all South America – is not a country for a squeamish vegetarian. Luis and Sara Elizalde greeted us and proceeded to treat us all like

Opposite *Avenues of trees divide and protect the garden at Dos Talas from the pampas winds. I have never visited a garden with such large shelter belts – like a home counties estate on the edge of a Shetland heath.*
Below *Luis Elizade, who learned his English driving a yellow cab in New York, presides over the 3500-acre estancia.*

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that I have never seen before in an amateur, private garden. The planting is still, by Di's account, strongly influenced by Beth Chatto and has a very English style, with great drifts of penstemons, kniphofia, salvias, dahlias, *Alchemilla mollis*, opium poppies, cardoons and a dozen more plants from a standard English plant list. But the tightly clipped columns that add structure to the border turn out to be lilly-pilly (*Acmena smithii* var. *minor*), which is native to Australia. Di says that they take the heat and dryness completely in their stride. However, the lushness of the mown grass is down to heavy watering despite the smoke hazing the air from the not-so distant bush fires.

Follow the path round the tight corner and everything changes. The halfway garden between England and Australia is left behind, with a garden area composed of perfectly clipped balls and mounds of lilly-pilly, glabra, *Rhagodia spinescens*, grey *Westringia fruticosa* (a rosemary like shrub with twenty-five species native to Australia) and lavender, all planted around white-trunked lemon-scented eucalypts. Paddock grass grows in the open spaces. The tight sculptural clipping of the naturally scraggy native plants transforms them. Surely this is the definition of gardening?

The garden then moves into a large, very European, formal area of garden made of lilly-pilly lollypops flanking broad formal paths. The lilly-pilly is underplanted with bedding of white agapanthus and heliotropes, and has a coppery tinge that doesn't quite seem to work with the heliotrope but when you look down the equally formal terracing and steps from the house with the tiers of cypress hedges, you can only see the white agapanthus and it looks superb. But it all comes as rather a formal shock after the restrained coolness and stylishness of the clipped mounds and gums.

We go down the steps to the 'Australian' garden. This is the work of Jenny, Di's daughter, a practising landscape designer. There is a dramatic change. Jenny developed this at weekends and holidays, allowed to do so by Di on condition that it never had to be watered. Di had enough to do without that. The grass is a parched brown. It seems impossible that it might survive. It will. All bare soil is thickly mulched with shredded bark. Newly planted areas are mere dots of new plants in a large sea of mulch. Nothing has been crammed or rushed here. Everything is measured and planned on a big scale.

'But we do a lot of plonking,' says Di. 'And I learned as I went along,' added Jenny. 'You have to be patient with Australian gardens,' Di said. 'They are very slow.' 'It has helped that I haven't been here all the time,' Jenny said. 'Every time I come there are changes that I notice.'

Many of the shrubs are clipped, as they are elsewhere in the garden, and many grow in their natural shape. The colours are muted – greys, ochres (including all the grass) and largely glaucous shades of green. Sculpture abounds, with beautifully carved inscriptions in stone. One, on a tall slim piece of grey stone in this part of the garden, reads 'And we shall walk and talk in gardens all misty and wet with rain and we shall never, never grow so old again'. I do not know this but, in this parched land with the fires burning all around, so very far from the damp, dark green of home, it is powerfully moving. Later I look it up and discover that it is by Van Morrison from a song on *Astral Weeks* called 'Sweet Thing'. The song is ravishingly beautiful. I then remember that I don't like Van Morrison. And another wall of prejudice comes tumbling thankfully down.

There is more to this garden – I have not mentioned the vineyard that rolls down the hill from the lawn at the back of the house producing, I can attest, a wonderful red wine – all of it is beautifully done. It is a major garden. But the way that it crosses cultures is by far the most interesting thing about it.

Jenny is taking her mother's skill, experience and love of gardening, rooted back in her British upbringing, and taking it into a modern Australia, using an Australian idiom and native Australian plants. The result is something genuinely new and creative and, I think, very beautiful.

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