

In brief

Name La Bambouseraie

What Long-established garden with extensive plantings of bamboos.

Where southern France, north of Nîmes in the Gard area.

Size 29 acres.

Climate Mediterranean.

Soil Light gravel and loam.

Points of interest Largest collection of bamboos in Europe; collection of Japanese acers; specimen sequoias, magnolias and ginkgos. There is an evocation of a Laotian village and a Japanese-inspired valley garden.

Bamboo fencing lines the route through a tranquil valley, inspired by the art and culture of Japan and planted with ginkgo and Japanese maples.

Bamboozled

La Bambouseraie survived inauspicious beginnings to take its place among Europe's most striking gardens

WORDS JOHN HOYLAND PHOTOGRAPHS HERVÉ LENAIN

Driving along minor roads across the flat plain north of Montpellier the landscape is unmistakably French. Rosemary, lavenders, wild thymes and the occasional olive tree seem to be the only vegetation growing among the vineyards that line the route. But then you arrive at La Bambouseraie: cool, verdant and welcoming; an improbable oasis in this Mediterranean landscape, and a horticultural delight.

The gardens were created in the middle of the 19th century by Eugène Mazel, a passionate botanist whose enormous wealth led him to create both La Bambouseraie at Prafance and a garden on the French Riviera. This was a period of colonial expansion and new plants were arriving in Europe from all over the world. At Prafance, Mazel planted an avenue of the newly described *Sequoia sempervirens* and bisected it with an avenue of *Trachycarpus fortunei*. He collected 300 species of oak and planted important collections of magnolias, but his great passion was for bamboo, and he began to create Europe's most extensive collection of the genus. It was a vast and costly project, which even involved building a 3km-long canal to bring water into the garden. By the end of the century, Mazel was bankrupt.

In 1902 the collection at Prafance was rescued by Gaston Nègre, a plantsman and former gardener for Mazel, but it wasn't until 1953 that the gardens were opened to the public. The early struggle to attract visitors wasn't helped by the wretched winter of 1956 that killed all but the hardiest of the garden's bamboos. Since those difficult early days the garden has flourished and now, under the guiding hand of Gaston's granddaughter, Muriel, it is now, along with the gardens at Villandry, the most visited garden in France.

Much of the original landscaping of the garden is still in place. The remaining >

▷ specimens of the avenue of *Sequoia sempervirens* hint at its former glory and are underplanted with *Phyllostachys sulphurea* f. *viridis*. The scale is breathtaking: 40m-tall trees alongside 14m-tall bamboos, with bright sunlight gently filtering through the foliage, really do evoke a great cathedral. The site is bisected by a wide avenue of mature *Trachycarpus fortunei*. Muriel, with an eye on the future, has planted smaller trachycarpus among the giant specimens.

“This place has been part of me all my life and I want to pass this extraordinary inheritance on to future generations,” she says. “It is beautiful and enchanting. It never ceases to move me.”

The wide avenues of giant bamboos are impressive, but it is the paths that meander through the garden that enchant me most. Areas of golden bamboos, the thickness of a wrist and as tall as a house, give way to more sombre plantings of the glaucous columns of *Phyllostachys pubescens*. There are lots of other plants here: magnificent specimens of *Cornus controversa* ‘Variegata’ sparkle in a glade of dark-stemmed bamboo; centenarian *Magnolia grandiflora* lord it over smaller specimens. In a new garden, created in 2000, a collection of Japanese acers is planted in a shallow valley surrounding a meandering water course. The uncontested stars of the garden, though, are the bamboos.

Among the leaf litter, powerful new shoots of the giant *Phyllostachys bambusoides* are pushing upwards. In 1963 these all flowered and died. After having been cut down they regrew and eight years later were over ten metres tall. If you’re not a bamboo expert, the range of colours of bamboo stems, which include smoky blues, golds and bright greens, ▷



Sunlight filtered through the foliage of tall trees and bamboo gives the garden an almost cathedral-like feel of space and grandeur.



Above In 2000 part of the garden was sculpted to evoke a Japanese valley garden.

Right A design based on a Japanese *tori* gate marks the entrance to a bamboo walk.

Below right Greenhouses, built in 1860, are still used to display collections of tender plants.

Below Water features and ancient bonsai trees add to the garden's Asian ambience.





▷ can be a revelation. I came across a variety that has bright green dashes along its stem, like a message in morse code. *Phyllostachys edulis* 'Bicolor', reads the discrete sign.

The groves and alleys are places to linger, and I notice that others have succumbed to the charms of the place. In one area sweethearts have carved their names into the bamboo, and the specimen on which Yves and Cecile advertised their love 20 years ago seems still to be growing strongly. Wandering around the garden you are accompanied by the music of the place: the soft rustling of foliage, the dull clang, like a giant windchime, of the bamboos, and the gentle murmuring of

cool water. Monsieur Mazel's enthusiasm for plants, now under the guardianship of his former gardener's granddaughter, is alive and well and still flows through the gardens. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Address La Bamboueraie, Prafance, 30140 Générargues, France.

Website bamboueraie.com

READER TOUR

In October writer John Hoyland and GARDENS ILLUSTRATED editor Juliet Roberts are leading a reader tour to France and will be visiting some of the Paris region's best gardens. For details of how to join them, see page 17.

8 of Muriel Nègre's favourite bamboos

1 *Pseudosasa japonica*

Japanese bamboo that is hardy throughout Britain, with long, narrow glossy leaves. Easy to grow and will tolerate both windy and shady situations. Up to 3m. AGM*. USDA 7a-10b†.

2 *Fargesia nitida*

A dense-foliaged, evergreen bamboo that makes a good hedge. Tough and easy to grow, the canes have a purple hue and the leaves are long and narrow. 2.5-4m. RHS H4†, USDA 7b-11.

3 *Phyllostachys sulphurea* f. *viridis*

The pale green canes fade to a luminous golden yellow, often with green striations. Can be huge – at Prafance specimens have reached 15m – so only consider if you have plenty of space. Around 8m.

4 *Phyllostachys bambusoides* 'Castillonii'

A clump-forming bamboo, with deep yellow canes that have a distinctive green groove on alternate sides of the stems between the leaf nodes. Regularly remove the lower leaves to appreciate the luminous stems. 6m. AGM.

5 *Phyllostachys nigra*

The very popular 'black bamboo'. The canes are green for the first two years and then become darker until they are the colour of polished ebony. Likes rich, moist soil. 2.5-5m. AGM. RHS H5, USDA 7a-10b.

6 *Semiarundinaria fastuosa*

Fast-growing species that is hardy in Britain. 4-8m. AGM. RHS H4, USDA 6b-11.

7 *Phyllostachys edulis* 'Heterocycla'

The unusual stems show how this bamboo got its common name – the tortoise bamboo. Up to 15m. USDA 7a-11.

8 *Phyllostachys nigra* f. *henonis*

Arching stems that develop a blue-grey sheen as they age. 2.5-6m. AGM. RHS H5, USDA 7a-11.

*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society.
†Hardiness ratings given where available.



1, 2 & 3 STEFFEN HAUSER / BOTANIKFOTO, ANDREA JONES & EMANUEL LATTES / ALAMY, 4 & 5 NEIL HOLMES / GAPPHOTOS