

To gaze on beauty

With a brief to bring in the landscape, Tom de Witte and Corrine Lecluyse have designed a garden without boundaries at the home of a former music producer in the Lot region of France

WORDS JOHN HOYLAND PHOTOGRAPHS MAAYKE DE RIDDER

The traditional swimming pool has been transformed into a natural swimming pool with plants that filter the water and help blend the pool with the rest of the garden.



Facing page

Left From the shade of the terrace, the garden falls away, appearing to merge with the distant rolling hills.

Right Mounds of *Kalimeris incisa* and the plumes of *Stipa gigantea* complement the light-coloured stone of the former farmhouse.

This page

Left Close to the pool, beds of perennials and grasses are planted to mimic the contours of the surrounding hills and valleys.

Below left At the end of the summer, the orange daisies of *Rudbeckia missouriensis* reflect the changing colours of the landscape.

Below right Water mint (*Mentha aquatica*), *Iris sibirica*, *Iris pseudacorus* and other aquatic plants have colonised the shallow pond and help to filter the swimming pool water.

It is this view that brought me here," says Yolande Skura as we look out from the terrace of her garden towards deep valleys and rolling hills. "This is one of the last wild, authentic parts of paradise left in Europe," she says. We are in the Parc National de Quercy in the Lot region of France, in the tiny farmstead of Mas del Lum where Yolande, after 42 years of city life as a classical music producer, has come to make a home and a garden, and to gaze on beauty.

When she bought the property, seven years ago, she was not a gardener so needed to learn quickly. Some of her favourite gardens

to look at were those of Piet Oudolf and through him she got in contact with Omna Landscape Design, run by the Dutch garden design duo of Tom de Witte and Corrine Lecluyse. Tom had worked with Oudolf for 20 years and describes him as his mentor.

"They designed the garden five years ago and Tom returns every year [the team is based in the Netherlands] to tweak," says Yolande. "I was very naïve, and didn't realise that caring for a garden you don't just need a strong pair of arms, but 20 strong pairs of arms.

"At first, lots of plants didn't reappear in the spring, not because they had died but

because when I weeded I wasn't sure which were the weeds and which were the plants." Yolande learned quickly and the garden is now immaculately maintained for both her enjoyment and that of the bed-and-breakfast guests, who stay in the beautifully renovated buildings that make up the property.

Tom and Corrine have created a garden that sits comfortably in the surrounding landscape. On his first visits to the site, Tom walked around the fields and woodlands of the surrounding area to observe the types of plants growing there and to get a sense of the spirit of the place. "If you want a garden ▷

A pool as nature intended

The pool at Mas del Lum was a conventional swimming pool until Yolande converted it. A separate planting area was added to act as a filter and the water pumped between this 'cleaning area' and the swimming area. Keeping the areas separate made this an easy option for adapting a chemical pool without having to completely restructure and redesign this part of the garden.

The planting area is lined with pebbles and planted with iris, reeds, mints and other

aquatic plants, which are not grown in soil but anchored by their roots into the cobbles, pebbles and gravel that form the base.

Not only do the plants take up nutrients that would otherwise cause algae to flourish, but they also give the pond its own ecosystem – attractive to visiting wildlife – and help it blend in with the garden.

"It is like swimming through silk," says Yolande. "There are times when the water looks a bit green, particularly after a

thunderstorm. It is still safe to swim in, but it doesn't look as attractive as the crystal clear water we usually have."

To ensure that the water does look sparkling for her bed-and-breakfast guests, Yolande has also installed a non-chemical cleaning system to back up the activity of the plants. Any debris from the surface of the water is skimmed off and the water passed through a series of filters that quickly remove nutrients and algae.

KEY ELEMENTS

What Large country garden connected to surrounding valleys and hills.

Where In the Parc National de Quercy, in the Lot region of France.

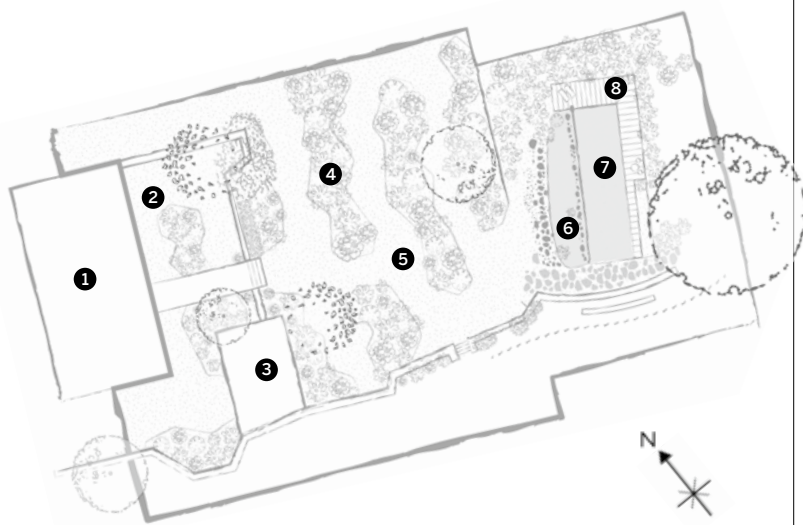
Soil Thin layer of poor alkaline over rock.

Garden size Ten acres.

Special features Heavily planted beds of mainly grasses and herbaceous perennials that overlook open countryside. Orchards of walnuts, apples and pears, plus a vegetable garden. A swimming pool that is naturally filtered by plants.

Designed by Tom de Witte and Corrine Lecluyse, Omna Landscape (omna.nl).

- 1 House
- 2 Terrace
- 3 Loggia
- 4 Planting beds
- 5 Gravel
- 6 Shallow pond, natural water cleaning area
- 7 Swimming pool
- 8 Decked area



PLAN BY LIAM McAULEY





On the sunny terrace *Sesleria autumnalis*, *Schizachyrium scoparium* and *Kalimeris incisa* 'Alba' thrive in the well-drained soil.

Four flower beds are designed to resemble waves, or streams, as Tom calls them, laid out in layers to echo the distant hills and valleys

▷ that looks natural, studying the plants that grow in the area will inspire you about what type of plants to use," he says.

A broad terrace in front of the house contains a pastel-coloured rectangular bed planted with a carpet of calming *Kalimeris incisa* 'Alba', which is punctuated in spring by tall white alliums and later in the year by the delicate spires of *Sesleria autumnalis* and the pale flowers of *Echinacea purpurea* 'Jade'. Large terracotta pots of rosemary add perfume to the area and a large silk tree, *Albizia julibrissin*, provides shade.

The terrace overlooks the main garden and, in the distance, the gently undulating hills of the national park. Four flower beds are designed to resemble waves, or streams, as Tom calls them, laid out in layers to echo the distant hills and valleys. "The views are so spectacular that I wanted the transition between the garden and the landscape to appear seamless, so there are no boundary fences or hedges, and the streams of plants feel like a continuation of the landscape," explains Tom.

The planting is light and airy. Each bed has its own colour theme and is connected to its neighbour by the repeated use of grasses such as *Stipa tenuissima*, *Stipa gigantea* and the scented grass *Sporobolus heterolepis*. To

anchor the planting *Helleborus orientalis*, *Helleborus foetidus*, *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii*, *Thymus vulgaris* and other plants with strong evergreen foliage are threaded through the beds.

Further from the house is a swimming pool with naturally cleaned water. When Yolande bought the property this was a typical rectangular pool. "I didn't like the shape of the pool, nor the fact that the water was cleaned with chemicals," she says. She had the idea to convert the pool to a natural swimming pool, softening the shape by adding a shallow curved planting area along one side, where the plants that filter the water would grow (see page 77).

In the past six years Yolande has learned to be a gardener from Tom and from rolling her sleeves up and working. "Most of all," she says, "I have learned from looking; you learn a lot from taking the time to observe nature." And there are few more beautiful places to sit and stare than at Mas del Lum. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Address Mas del Lum, Boussac, 46100 Figeac, Lot, France.
Tel+33 (0)5 65 40 06 63.
Web mas-del-lum.fr

9 plants that echo a wider landscape

1 *Kalimeris incisa* 'Alba'

The domes of apple-green foliage are smothered throughout the summer with aster-like flowers. Tom has also specified a blue-flowered cultivar for the garden. 60cm. USDA 5a-9b*.

2 *Stipa gigantea*

The arching stems of golden, oat-like flower heads can grow to great heights, but are so delicate that they form a transparent screen.

2.5m. AGM*. RHS H4, USDA 6a-10b.

3 *Gaura lindheimeri*

The narrow, wiry stems carry a billow of small, white flowers from May to the end of August. It is a short-lived perennial that can be grown as an annual.

1-1.5m. AGM. RHS H4, USDA 5a-9b.

4 *Allium schubertii*

A. schubertii has tiny, metallic-purple flowers on stems of differing lengths and structural seedheads that look like exploding stars.

50cm. RHS H4, USDA 5a-9b.

5 *Perovskia atriplicifolia*

The effect of the white, downy stems and lavender flowers is of a blue heat-haze.

Perovskia should be cut back hard in spring to encourage fresh, young growth. 1.5m. RHS H5, USDA 5a-9b.

6 *Sesleria autumnalis*

During the summer this grass produces masses of narrow, silvery-grey plumes. They sway in the slightest breeze, bringing movement and energy to borders.

1.5m. RHS H5, USDA 5a-8b.

7 *Erigeron karvinskianus*

A low-growing plant, with wiry stems and a froth of daisy-like flowers, that revels in the poor, well-drained soil of Yolande's garden. 50cm. AGM. RHS H5, USDA 6a-9b.

8 *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii*

The evergreen mounds are handsome all year, but the plant is most striking in the spring when it produces huge chartreuse flower heads. 1.5m. RHS H4, USDA 6b-10b.

9 *Limonium latifolium*

A perennial that thrives in dry soils and sunny spots. The cloud of small, mauve flowers fits the garden's lightness and airiness. 75cm. RHS H7, USDA 5a-9b.



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