

High on a hill

There is a view of Cap Ferrat from the curved infinity pool, across the hummocky planting of silver-leaved species such as santolina, lavender and rosemary, shot through with pink *Centranthus ruber*



Making the most of the spectacular view, garden designer James Basson has softened the hillside setting of this French Riviera garden with snaking terraces, winding paths and splashes of brightly coloured planting

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PHOTOGRAPHS MARIANNE MAJERUS



Those who saw garden designer James Basson's gold-medal-winning 'Perfumer's Garden in Grasse' at this year's RHS Chelsea Flower Show will know that what he does so consummately is create an enhanced version of the natural landscape. The landscape in this case was the craggy, aromatic hillsides of the Alpes-Maritimes, close to where James and his wife Helen had spent a year working in a private garden during his Greenwich University garden-design degree. Having won his first RHS medal (silver gilt) for a community garden at Hampton Court in 2000, he moved to the South of France and set up Scape Design. The diversity and tenacity of the wind-buffed and sun-baked shrubs became his inspiration for creating sustainable gardens, and his introduction to nurseryman Olivier Filippi was, he says, a meeting of minds. 'He was growing the plants that I wanted to grow, and explaining how to grow them in a garden environment.'

In 2010, James was asked to redesign an irregularly shaped garden that wraps around a property on the hillside above Villefranche-sur-Mer. It had sparkling views across the Mediterranean, steeply sloping grass that had to be constantly watered and a handful of out-of-place Phoenix palms. The owners wanted to have a garden that would survive with little or no watering – mosquitoes were a

problem – and that created privacy for each of three properties that they own on the site: the main house, a cottage above, and a guest house below and to the west.

James took his cue from the landscape – the limestone cliff behind the house is covered in *Euphorbia dendroides*, *Quercus ilex* and carob trees – and created, what he describes as, two 'fudgy areas' of trees and shrubs between the main house and the two other houses. The land drops three metres away from the flat terrace and rectangular swimming pool of the main house to the mesh boundary of another property belonging to a neighbour. Taking his inspiration from the traditional stone terraces used by farmers and vineyard owners, James designed three terraces, traversed by stone steps, that snake across the slope and into the garden below the guest house. Here, the terraces are faced with chestnut hurdles rather than stone. 'I wanted to keep the sinuous lines of the grassy landscape that was here before, so the garden didn't become too rectilinear and formal,' he explains.

As an agreed experiment, James decided to give his clients an exhilarating matrix of robust and colourful plants, mainly in shades of pink and white with the occasional splash of yellow, which roll across the terraces in bands of green or silver foliage. The width of the bands varies, each one containing species of a similar height, ranging from 30cm to a metre, so

that the plants should co-exist without any species swamping another. More than half the mix is made up of evergreens, such as lavender, thyme and santolina, and with the exception of rosemary, which is clipped to about 30cm and creates a graphic line through both parts of the lower garden, there is no dominant species.

As the slope is gentler below the guest house, the hummocky profile of these tightly planted terraces creates a jewel-like foreground to the view across to Cap Ferrat from the curved infinity pool. Guests can wander down gravel paths to an area of undulating zoysia grass, and beyond this to a terrace wrapped in vegetation. There are a further two enclosed seating areas at the bottom of the main-house garden and here, too, is a developing canyon walkway, planted with staggered olives on two-metre stems, which will eventually create a new boundary.

To soften the expanse of Pierre de Bourgogne flags around the rectangular pool, James wanted a tree with a natural-looking form. In a nursery near Rome, he found a group of abandoned *Lagerstroemia indica* with exactly the shape he wanted and peeling stems that drew out the warmth in the stone. They stand as permitted aliens in a garden that melds gloriously into the surrounding landscape □

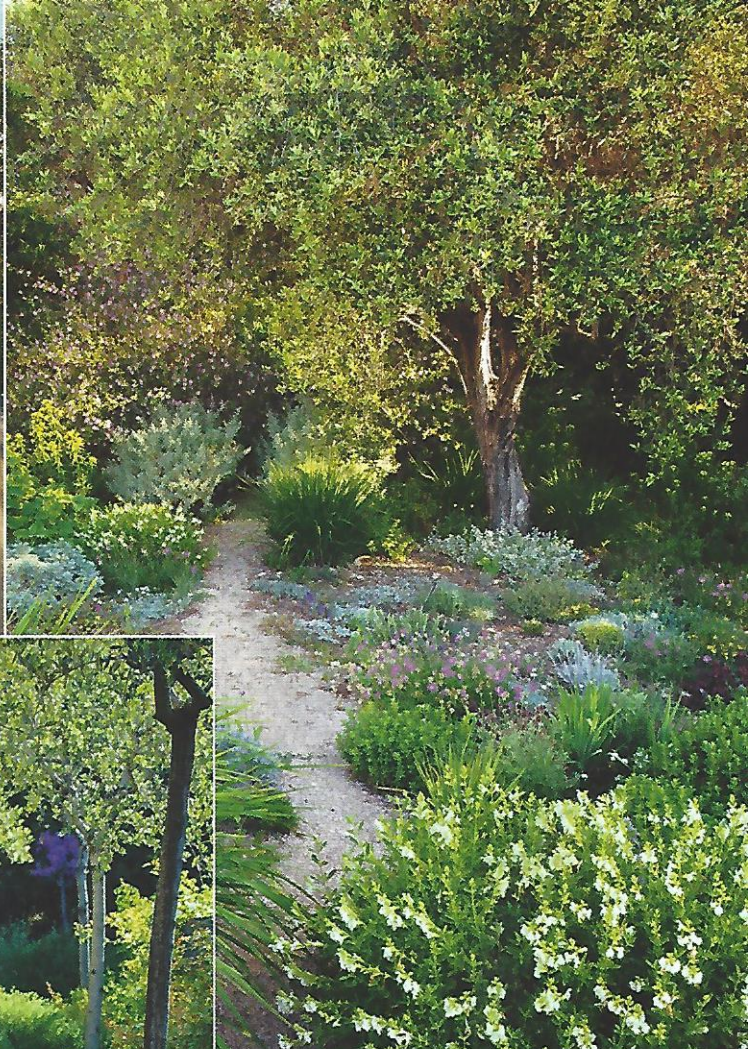
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Scape Design: 00-377-9797 1536; scapedesign.com

A view of cypresses and palms from the guest-house garden, with limestone cliffs in the background. *Centranthus ruber* 'Albus', oleander and salvia can be seen in the foreground

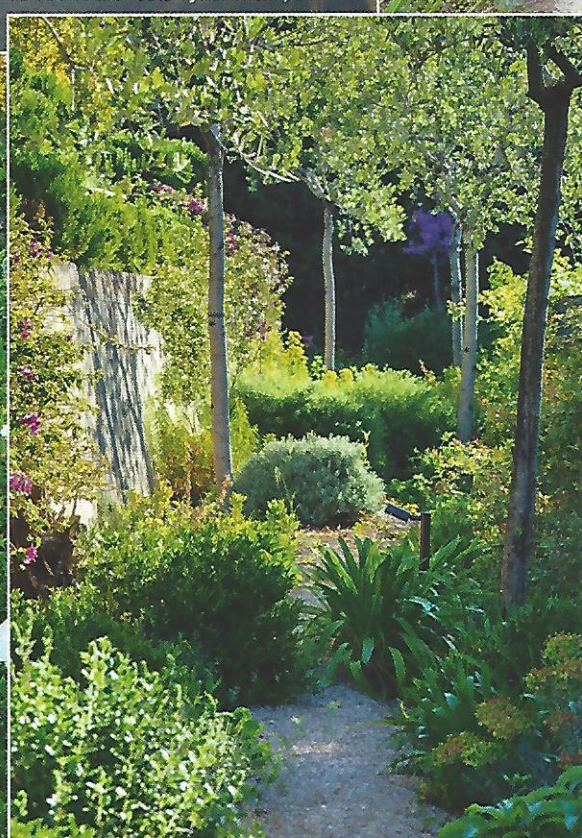




Lagerstroemia indica trees soften the Pierre de Bourgogne stone flags that surround the rectangular main pool



ABOVE A path leads from the terraces to the vegetable garden and is bordered by thymes and other plants. LEFT At the bottom of the main garden is an olive-tree-lined canyon walk. BELOW An open area of undulating zoysia grass below the guest house



THIS PICTURE The terrace at the bottom of the guest-house garden. ABOVE LEFT Stone steps lead between the terraces

