

James Basson's gardens ooze Mediterranean charm, but require little work – or water, says **Caroline Donald**

**C**alling all those with homes in the south of France. It's August and you've successfully negotiated the easyJet flight to Nice. The sun is beating down and Britain's soggy summer is but a distant memory. So are you lying by the pool with a glass of rosé to hand, lulled by the sound of bees humming nearby and the scent of lavender, rosemary and thyme – or are you worrying that it is all going to wilt and your lawn frazzle unless you get that sprinkler system fixed?

James Basson is an award-winning British designer who has been based on the Côte d'Azur for the past 20 years. His work is an inspiration for those wanting to create a Mediterranean



# Some like it hot

garden that can be left largely to its own devices, needs little watering and is also wildlife-friendly and sustainable in the long term. Along with his Devon-born wife, Helen, 43, Basson, a boyish 42, runs Scape Design, and their beat extends from Menton, near the Italian border, along the coast and the Alpes-Maritime, to Provence.

The couple, who have three children, design about six new gardens, including sustainable plans for their future development, each year. The turnover could be higher, but with more clients and staff (they employ two people at the moment) comes more hassle. "Running a business in France is tough: the taxes are high – social charges take approximately 60% of earnings – paperwork is intensive and very few people understand the bureaucracy," Helen says. On the other hand, "Life here on the whole is amazing, particularly for the children – skiing in winter at the nearby resorts, where you can just pop up for the day, and sailing in the summer. The climate is great and so is the food."

The couple bought their own five-bedroom "bog-standard bungalow" near the village of Le Bar-sur-Loup for about £150,000 in 1999; they say it's now worth double that. "It was liveable in straight away, set in 7,000 sq metres of natural woodland and walkable to the village, while still feeling in the middle of nowhere. It's half an hour to Nice airport, and well positioned for our clientele," Helen says. "We are still modifying it and aim to finish our green roof one day; we have installed solar panels and done a small extension using hemp and lime mortar. One day we would love to make the whole house eco, but between running our business and raising three kids, time and money are not in our favour just yet." Their own garden is the woodland: untouched, save for the occasional strim to prevent forest fires.

Scape's clients are inspired by the Bassons' belief in creating gardens that are at one with their surroundings. The first thing James and Helen have to do is manage expectations. "People come here during the summer expecting bright



Pazets



James and Helen Basson, above left, specialise in low-maintenance Mediterranean gardens, such as that at Le Rouret, main picture. Local plants feature in their designs, with added colour from more exotic specimens such as the cockspear coral tree, above centre

## Get the Med look

- Plant small in autumn, making a bowl in the soil that will hold 2-3 litres of water: this will soak well in, encouraging the roots to delve deep. Don't worry if it looks sparse, as autumn and winter rains will help plants get established and fill out.
- Use evergreen shrubs as the backbone of the garden.
- Gravel is the new grass.
- Don't cover every inch of ground with plants, but look to the wild – there is often quite a bit of space between them.
- Let the likes of fennel, scabious, *Stipa calamagrostis* and broom self-seed.
- Think in layers: scabious pops up through lavender, for example. If you

start thinking in three dimensions, you end up with more variety.

■ If you insist on an irrigation system, use a drip feed under a mulch of gravel. Water in the spring and autumn. In summer, the plants will get mouldy roots if they have too much water.

■ Always include areas for summer shade near the house and terrace.

**Best plants for Mediterranean gardens**  
**Trees** olives, citrus, pomegranate, mulberry  
**Shrubs and subshrubs** Rosemary, lavender, *Teucrium fruticosum*, *Rosa 'Mutabilis'*, box, cistus, buddleia, *Viburnum tinus*, perovskia, *Cotinus cogglyria*, thyme  
**Perennials and bulbs** agapanthus, scabious, eryngium  
**Grasses** *Stipa tenuissima*, *Stipa calamagrostis*

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green lawns and flowers," says Basson, whose beautiful Provençal show garden for L'Occitane perfumers won a gold at the Chelsea Flower Show this year. "What they should be after is more of a siesta tone. They are here for the excitement of the Côte d'Azur, but actually the landscape all around is resting and soft, so it creates an atmosphere. My gardens roll into that wider landscape: if you want a green garden in summer, don't call me."

Instead he brings something of the British relaxed and "messy" approach, nurturing nature, rather than trying to control it, as is often the French way. His plants, such as perovskia and sage, achilleas and helichrysum, soft stipa grasses and wafting gaura, are allowed to spill out over paths, grow through each other and wander from their original site in a lazy haze of butterflies and bees. It's a far cry from the flashy, high-maintenance gardens of the local super-rich, where everything is neat as a pin, sprinklers whizzing over the lawn and rows of bedding plants in gaudy colours.

Nor is Basson keen on the Provençal cliché of sweeping lawns, palm trees round the pool and lavender under olive trees lining the drive. Instead, he has built up a reputation for creating naturalistic, contemporary schemes that rely largely on evergreen shrubs – think lavender, cistus, *Bupleurum fruticosum*, box and myrtle – combined with hard-working perennials and self-seeding annuals.

His gardens are more about wildlife-friendly year-round form than eye-popping summer colour, and he often uses native plants that he has seen growing on the surrounding hillsides. It is an approach that embraces ecology as well as cutting down on maintenance costs, and is well suited to gardens where the owners may not be there all the time. His method is to put the right plants in the right place, water them just enough to get them established, then let them get on with it.

Basson's clients are mostly successful business people; north European expats and second-homers, well heeled enough to water at will (it costs €2 per cubic metre), but he encourages them to step away from the sprinkler and look to what is doing well in the wider landscape for inspiration.

"Everything flushes in spring, then dries out and closes down until the September rains," Basson says. Though

you don't kiss goodbye to any interest in the garden during the dry summer months, just because that flush of youth has been replaced by silvery maturity and bleached tones. "We use things with good architecture – seedheads that are going to hold, and grasses that give us late romance."

His hero is Olivier Filippi, whose nursery in the Languedoc supplies only plants for dry climates ([jardin-sec.com](http://jardin-sec.com)) and who has been studying Mediterranean plants in their natural environment for the past 30 years. Basson has been following in his footsteps (literally), walking in the limestone Provençal *maquis* and *garrigue* and observing what plants grow successfully there.

Michael Walker, 50, is one of Basson's clients and has benefitted from these forays into the hillsides. He manages his extended family's smart five-bedroom villa, with far-reaching views down to the Mediterranean, in the village of Le Rouret, near Grasse and Valbonne, which is let out for holidays ([villalouerout.com](http://villalouerout.com)). Walker asked Basson to design the villa's garden, incorporating the existing olive trees, with a budget of about €150,000.

He wanted a design that was practical yet stylish, that could be maintained by a gardener one day a week and needed little irrigation. "We really like James's low-key style," says Walker. "His use of plants found in the hills and mountains around the area just made sense: if they survived in the arid wild conditions, they would survive in a low-maintenance garden. They provide colour all year round and, as the family spends much time 'out of season' at the villa, this was important. We wanted to be able to walk out of the living area straight into the garden. You spend so much time outdoors here, even in winter."

If Basson had his way, he would ban lawns entirely, using a mulch of gravel or wood bark with plants growing through it instead. However, it can be a losing battle against clients (who are paying him, after all), Walker included – people do like somewhere soft to walk or for the children to play on, however much maintenance it needs. He has lately found an unlikely ally in his argument, though, in the shape of the black-and-white-striped tiger mosquito, which has recently arrived in southern France and carries dengue fever and other tropical diseases. It bites at any time of day – and one of its favourite breeding spots is under the sprinklers on a damp lawn.

Most of the properties Basson is working on cost upwards of €1m. "A typical budget we would work on would be €300,000 to €500,000 for the garden," he says. "In London that money might go on a kitchen, but here they spend much more time outside, so it is a more important space. Summer kitchens and pool areas are expensive – it's big works."

As they look out across a new scheme of tiny plants dotted about an expanse of gravel, his clients might need a leap of faith to look forward to the not-too-distant day when it will fill out into a beautiful canvas of plants. While they generally understand what it is that Basson is about, his main obstacle is their gardeners, who can be slow to adapt to a regime where watering neat, clipped shapes and formal layouts are not part of the routine. He says the best person to use is "your youngest bloke who has no idea, or else there is a danger he will arrange everything in tidy lines". Not how nature, or Basson, intended.

■ [scapedesign.com](http://scapedesign.com)

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