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BALANCING ACT

Taking inspiration from the landscape and incorporating ideas of biodiversity and sustainability, designer James Basson has applied a light touch to a naturalistic garden in southeast France fit for a harsh Mediterranean climate

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IN BRIEF

What Naturalistic, drought-tolerant garden with traditional terraces and a commanding view of the surrounding landscape.

Where Grasse, southeast France.

Size One and a half acres.

Soil Heavy clay with improved drainage for planting.

Climate Mediterranean.

Hardiness zone USDA 9.

Typically wild planting flows down towards a modern swimming pool with the restored farmhouse nestled in the background. The piece of lawn was requested as a place of play and as a spot from which to admire the spectacular view of the surrounding hillsides.



Above These large pieces of local stone bring the wild landscape right up to the house. James is keen to exploit the micro-climates that this type of landscaping creates, allowing different species to colonise between the stones.

Right Mature lime and olive trees punctuate the site with generous herbaceous plantings surrounding areas of lawn. Unfortunately, these lawns require irrigation, which has had a detrimental effect on this large olive tree in the foreground that resents the waterlogged clay.

In the 20 or so years since James and Helen Basson founded Scape Design they have grown into the landscape of southern France, carving a niche for themselves as desirable creators of sensitive and sustainable design. It was this reputation that in 2016 led to their being commissioned to develop a one-and-a-half-acre garden within a seven-and-a-half-acre site on a hillside above Grasse. The main body of planting that flows through the garden's terraces is now in its fifth year, but rather than gaining a settled permanence, the community of plants remains in a state of flux. As James is keen to emphasise, "the key word is change".

Set against a restored, stone farmhouse, the sweeping terrace walls lend both movement and solidity to the sloping site. A few features such as the swimming pool and the large retaining wall had already been built, but it was necessary to trace new terraces into the hillside. Scape worked with the Gortina family from the nursery, Gaudissart and Fred Capponi of Grasse Jardins to re-establish those familiar lines that are so much a part of the visual vocabulary of the Alpes-Maritimes. While the plants bring fullness, it is the agronomics of the surrounding landscape that determine the garden's essential character.

Scape's approach to planting was once to create a series of matrices where plants are allocated in a set ratio to be rolled out across the site. Now their plantings have become more dynamic. As James explains: "It is really about installing a process rather than painting a picture." This has been the natural progression as they have learned to work with, rather than against, the harsh conditions of the Mediterranean, but it is also easy to read the influence of the great designer and philosopher Gilles Clément and in particular his concept of *le jardin en mouvement*.

James admits that it was Clément who gave himself and a generation of designers "permission to think more freely about landscape and ecology". Simplistically, in *le jardin en mouvement*, the gardener steps lightly and allows plants to place themselves, shifting the pathways through natural processes of self-seeding and creeping growth. In this garden the planting has a loose, textural quality and even annual weeds such as *Hordeum jubatum* and *Daucus carota* are, while not actively encouraged, at least enjoyed. Scape leans ever more towards these free notions, but there is recognition of compromise. As James accepts, referencing the title of designer Thomas Church's 1955 book, "gardens are for people".

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While the plants bring fullness, it is the agronomics of the landscape that determine the garden's essential character





24 KEY PLANTS

1 *Phillyrea angustifolia* Tough, evergreen shrub that needs plenty of light and resents winter wet. Responds well to being clipped. 3m. RHS H5.

2 *Dianthus carthusianorum* Star-like flowers are held on stiff stems above tussocks of grass-like, evergreen foliage and vary in colour from pale pink through to reddish magenta. Prefers a slightly chalky, well-drained soil in full sun. 50cm. RHS H7.

3 *Salvia azurea* Willowy but tough salvia with an upright habit. Sky-blue flowers emerge in mid to late summer and persist until the first frosts. Can tolerate some shade but prefers full sun. Drought tolerant. 1.2m. RHS H5. USDA 5a-9b.

4 *Bituminaria bituminosa* Drought-tolerant perennial with delicate, lavender-blue pea-like flowers on wiry stems in spring. The green-grey, evergreen foliage has a strong and distinctive smell of bitumen. Full sun. 30cm. RHS H3-4.

5 *Euphorbia rigida* Early flowering perennial spurge with dramatic, glaucous, whorled stems of spiky leaves. Acid-green flowers take on reddish hues later in the season. Needs good drainage and full sun. 60cm. AGM*. RHS H6. USDA 7a-10b.

6 *Cephalaria leucantha* Pale-yellow, almost white, pincushion flowers on wiry stems with attractive, dissected, grey-green foliage. The whole effect is one of pleasing lightness. Prefers full sun on poor, well-drained soil. Will self-seed. 1.6m. RHS H4.

7 *Stipa calamagrostis* Semi-evergreen, mound-forming grass with feathery plumes of flowers in June that quickly turn an attractive biscuit brown and persist through winter. Will become floppy if grown on too rich a soil or in shade. 1.2m. AGM. RHS H4.

8 *Centranthus ruber* 'Albus' White form of the usually red or pink valerian. Upright stems produce soft heads of white flowers from late spring into early summer. Prefers dry, stony or chalky soils. Will self-seed vigorously. 1m. RHS H5.

9 *Foeniculum vulgare* Stately, if short-lived, perennial. Strong, self-supporting stems are topped with yellow umbels, much loved by pollinators. Will self-seed to the point of nuisance, but few dry gardens should be without it. 2m. RHS H4. USDA 4a-9b.

10 *Euphorbia characias* Iconic Mediterranean sub-shrub with fleshy, glaucous foliage and acid-green flowers in the early spring. The long-lasting inflorescences provide interest well into late summer. Very drought tolerant. Full sun. RHS H5.

11 *Linaria vulgaris* 'Alba' Masses of small, pure-white flowers with a yellow splotch at the mouth in midsummer. Best on poor soil in full sun. Will self-seed. RHS H4.

12 *Lotus dorycnium* Produces a mass of white pea-like flowers from May to July. Drought tolerant. Best on poor soil in full sun. 60cm. RHS H5.



For more key plants turn to page 89

Plants are allowed to place themselves, shifting the pathways through natural processes of self-seeding and creeping growth



Exuberant yet naturalistic planting spills down between the terraces with rosemary colonising the top of the wall and common fennel rising architecturally above. These dramatic umbels reach over 2.5m, which James suggests is an indicator of too much moisture and richness in the soil.

The planting is really about
installing a process rather
than painting a picture





▷ In principle, Scape has a strict rule of not installing irrigation systems and adheres as much as possible to an autumn-planting window that allows plants to establish over the cooler months reducing their need for water through the summer. Despite Scape's success many clients struggle to accept this approach, with the voracious summers instilling a "fear factor". But, beyond the water waste, irrigation in such a hot climate is a false economy as it creates the perfect conditions for fungus, which ravages the humidity-resenting native species.

In this garden an obvious area of compromise are the irrigated areas of lush grass that surround the pool. While much enjoyed by the clients' family, this has had unforeseen consequences for the plantings on the slope below, which have grown too lush and subsequently plants have died off more quickly. Established olive and lime trees have also suffered as their roots have become waterlogged on the heavy clay soil. From year two it has been a constant process of editing, largely removing the overly successful, herbaceous elements to the current mix where soft plumes of *Stipa calamagrostis* rise above the many blue stars of *Eryngium planum* and soft clouds of *Calamintha nepeta*. A few cultivars have found their way into the planting, including *Salvia rosmarinus* 'Miss Jessop's Upright'

providing deep-green verticals, and *Salvia azurea*, an unusual addition from the dry prairie of the US midwest, which softens the scene with willowy spires of the palest blue.

Drought-tolerant planting is often presented as zero maintenance, but this is misleading. If well conceived, these designs certainly require less attention than most, but they still need a hand on the tiller. A key to the success of this garden is the clients' investment in Scape's maintenance regime and the help of the artist gardener Vincent Schiva and garden manager Ale O'Neill.

Most of the plants in the garden are native and therefore well adapted to the extreme summer drought. They have excellent sustainable credentials with over 80 per cent being sourced from the small, organic Italian nursery, Vivaio Ciancavaré, and the rest from Montpellier-based master growers, Olivier and Clara Filippi, who have done much to promote sustainable planting design. James, who describes Olivier as a mentor, has always tried to adhere to his advice to "walk the desert" – not just in the literal sense to plant only drought-tolerant species, but also to be steadfast in his environmentalist principles. □

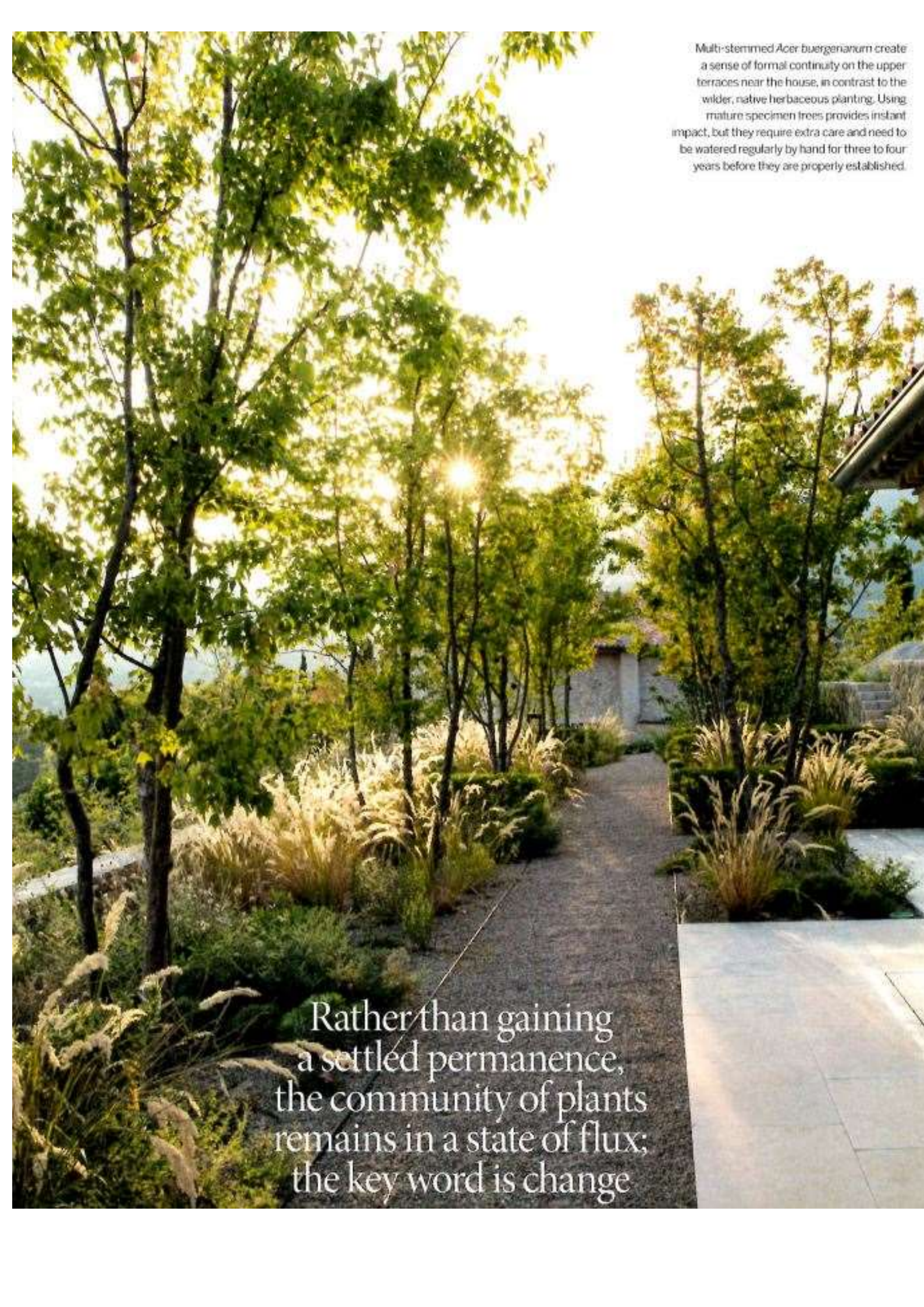
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Above Most trees within the garden are native Mediterranean species, but nearer the house, lines of the Chinese *Acer buergerianum* have been used to create more formality. Sometimes called the trident maple, this tree has glossy, green leaves and develops a rich, autumn colour.

Left above The large retaining wall and the pool pre-existed, but Scape developed the upper terraces and the soft landscaping. Here the seedheads of *Eryngium planum* contrast effectively with the soft plumes of *Stipa calamagrostis* catching the evening sun.

Left below The flowing lines of stonework run like ribbons through the garden and across the agrarian landscape. James was particularly pleased with the construction quality of the walls, which were built by local company Grasse Jardins. The paths are discreetly lit with bespoke lighting by Jean-Philippe Weimar, a long-time collaborator with Scape Design.



Multi-stemmed *Acer buergerianum* create a sense of formal continuity on the upper terraces near the house, in contrast to the wilder, native herbaceous planting. Using mature specimen trees provides instant impact, but they require extra care and need to be watered regularly by hand for three to four years before they are properly established.

Rather than gaining a settled permanence, the community of plants remains in a state of flux; the key word is change



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24 KEY PLANTS CONTINUED

13 *Origanum vulgare* 'Roseum' Useful marjoram with attractive mounds of evergreen foliage. Flowers July to September. Full sun and dry soil. 50cm. RHS H5.

14 *Scabiosa atropurpurea* Delicate, short-lived scabious with pale-purple pin-cushion flowers that rise above low rosettes of dissected foliage. 1m. RHS H4.

15 *Daucus carota* The wild carrot, with attractive, white umbels, appears where it wishes and mixes effortlessly with loose, naturalistic planting. Full sun to part shade on any soil, but will self-seed aggressively in light or gravel soils. 60cm. RHS H7.

16 *Teucrium fruticans* Evergreen shrub with small, light-green leaves covered in silver hairs and populated by purple-blue, salvia-like flowers in early to midsummer. Short-lived on rich soils. Does best in full sun. 1.5m. RHS H3. USDA 8a-10b.

17 *Centaurea jacea* subsp. *gaudinii* This rare, perennial cornflower produces large, pale-lavender or lilac flowers above silvery foliage throughout summer. Prefers a sunny position in well-drained soil. RHS H7.

18 *Salvia rosmarinus* 'Miss Jessopp's Upright' Useful, compact rosemary with a dramatic, upright habit. Light-blue flowers in spring and early summer above aromatic, dark-green foliage on a substantial woody structure. AGM. 1.5m. RHS H4.

19 *Lavandula x intermedia* Large, vigorous, hybrid lavender between *L. angustifolia* and *L. latifolia*. Classic, purple, scented flowers above silvery-green, aromatic foliage. Short-lived on rich soil. Needs excellent drainage and full sun. 1.2m. RHS H5.

20 *Euphorbia spinosa* Diminutive spurge that makes an attractive, evergreen mound of glaucous foliage with stems covered in small spines. Produces masses of limey flowers in late spring that soften to yellow as they age into midsummer. Can be clipped after flowering. Needs excellent drainage and full sun. 40cm. RHS H4.

21 *Satureja montana* A small sub-shrub with white to pale-lavender flowers that appear in mid to late summer and small, aromatic leaves. Prefers full sun but will tolerate partial shade. Hardy but relatively short-lived. 30cm. RHS H5. USDA 5a-8b.

22 *Hordeum jubatum* Short-lived perennial grass. A North American native now naturalised in many parts of the world. Another wild plant that has introduced itself into the planting mix, but is enjoyed for its soft texture. 60cm. AGM. RHS H6.

23 *Cichorium intybus* Produces a rush of mid-green foliage on strong upright, stems early in the season, and a mass of sky-blue flowers in mid to late summer that only open in strong sun. Prefers poor soil. 1.5m. RHS H5. USDA 3a-8b.

24 *Salvia reptans* Native to Mexico and parts of Texas, this slender-leaved sage has wonderful, deep-blue flowers. As long as it has good drainage, it is perfectly hardy, and it enjoys as much sun as possible. 1m. RHS H4.



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