



# WILD

The Naturalistic Garden

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A cursory look over this 3,500 square metre (0.9 acre) garden on France's Mediterranean coast would instantly remind any onlooker of the local vegetation – the maquis (scrubby, evergreen shrubs or small trees) and the somewhat lower and more ascetic looking garrigue ecosystems. The planting is bushy, to about head height, with dense growths of aromatic foliage, patches of bare gravelly ground, and a few smaller plants in the gaps. The limestone cliffs that overlook the garden help to set the scene: this is a garden that is supremely of its place.

'The client was interested in zero irrigation', says James Basson, who runs Scape Design with his wife, Helen, and who designed the garden in 2012, 'and in making it as relevant as possible to local landscape. They were very enthusiastic about plants and keen for us to try out as wide a range as possible.' James took the invitation seriously and used over 200 different varieties of plants, sourcing as much as he could from the catalogue of nurseryman Olivier Filippi (see pp.124–31). Some eight years later he is very open about the mistakes he felt he made. 'It was an early garden for us, working with this type of vegetation, and our biggest problem was that it was ex-agricultural land. It used to be used for growing flowers. It had been fed and treated for generations, and it was too rich.' This is the central paradox of Mediterranean zone garden-making. The most attractive and extensive range of native drought-tolerant plants are those of thin limestone soils, the vegetation known as garrigue. 'On a fertile soil', says Basson, 'when you start planting a Mediterranean garrigue-type landscape, everything just grows too quickly. Five years into the project we realized we had over-planted by 50 per cent. We had a lot of losses of plants competing with each other, and we had to massively prune stuff back.'

Now, much the wiser and with a string of gardens in the region under his belt, Basson has a refined strategy for planting an irrigation-free garden. 'You almost have

to overplant. If you put in small plants that will mature without competing with each other, then it takes five years to look good.' Instead, he tries to devise 'a balance between plants that will be more or less permanent, and those which are essentially temporary. Ideally, we then maintain the garden in a direction where it's clear what we will keep and what can go.' Over time, the longer-lived species will almost inevitably displace the shorter-lived ones, although the latter are often able to re-generate from seed. Upright myrtle spurge (*Euphorbia rigida*), a sprawling spring-flowering, lime-green perennial, is a good example of the latter. It helps to create a sense of unity in

## Les Cyprès

the garden, popping up everywhere but giving way to taller plants.

Planting in this garden involves thinking in layers: up to 30 centimetres, 30–60 centimetres, 60–120 centimetres (12 in, 12–24 in, 24–48 in), with the lowest layer becoming an underplanting to the taller in some places, in others opening out to become ground cover. The lowest layer plays an important role as an alternative to grass; there is no thirsty lawn here. The taller species are often variants on familiar Mediterranean plants: lavenders, species of rock rose (*Cistus*) and *Phlomis*, and rosemary – all very good at filling space with a mass of dense foliage that offers subtle variations in a spectrum from dark green to white-silver. Contrasting elements are provided by a limited number of species with rosettes of linear leaves, such as Algerian iris (*Iris unguicularis*), a classic regional winter-flowering species. These are few in number but make a big difference to what would otherwise be a relative uniformity of leaf shape and visual texture.

There is uniformity but still considerable diversity, thanks to the botanical enthusiasm of the original planting scheme. 'Now', Basson explains, 'we always choose three or four plants for a garden and use them widely, so they are spread throughout the landscape. Then we can interplant with huge diversity ... These theme plants will also provide seasonal continuity, with a lower layer of species that will change through the year.'

The maintenance regime established in the first few years is crucial to the long-term success of the garden. Fortunately, the Bassons have at hand Alejandro O'Neill (see pp.234–41), who runs a local garden design and management consultancy. 'He has a real eye for plants, he is very good with clients, and he communicates well with the gardeners. We call them artist-gardeners, as we set the system and then give them a game to play, the opportunity to manage creatively. Alejandro makes sure everyone is going in a thoughtful direction, as we don't dictate precisely.' The result is what Basson calls a 'dynamic landscape', which may develop in unpredictable ways. Pruning plays an important role. 'I used to think that low-maintenance gardening did not involve any pruning', says Basson, 'but Alejandro is very much into regulating the plant community through different ways of pruning, which gives the garden a good appearance in the summer, when there is nothing in flower and everything is a bit bland ... I used to leave things looking a bit shaggy, but he'll sculpt some and leave others to be scruffy, so the whole feel is of somewhere cared for.' Occasional replacement planting is foreseen, and part of the budget is kept back for 'refresher planting every few years.'

It has been said that with gardens, 'maintenance is half of design', and it is clear from the way this garden has developed that this is particularly true of Mediterranean gardens that have a high proportion of low, maquis-type shrubs. Design and ongoing horticulture are inseparable.



4. Yellow Phoenix 'Le Sud' (also p.99 bottom left) adds bold splashes of late winter/early summer colour in plantings dominated by sub-shrubs. Their evergreen and mound-forming habit offers year-round continuity. The white flowers on tall stems (bottom) are asphodel (*Asphodelus albus*), a common Mediterranean perennial, which in the cooler season bears rosettes of linear foliage that are a complete contrast to shrubs. Radically different to most poolside planting, the scents of Mediterranean vegetation add another sensory layer to an enjoyment of the view.







→ *Zoysia* grass (*Zoysia tenuifolia*) performs the visual functions of a traditional grass lawn, requiring very little irrigation. The bright silver-white foliage on the right is dusty miller (*Senecio viravivus*), one of the best grey and silver foliage plants available to designers in Mediterranean climates.



→ 14 A megalis habitat has relatively little variation in overall plant form, increasing the importance of its wide range of texture and foliage colour. Occasional clumps of linear foliage, such as the *Iris angustolaris* (overleaf) make a good contrast, as do the more irregular forms of herbaceous plants like the red-flowered valerian (*Gentianella ruber*).









