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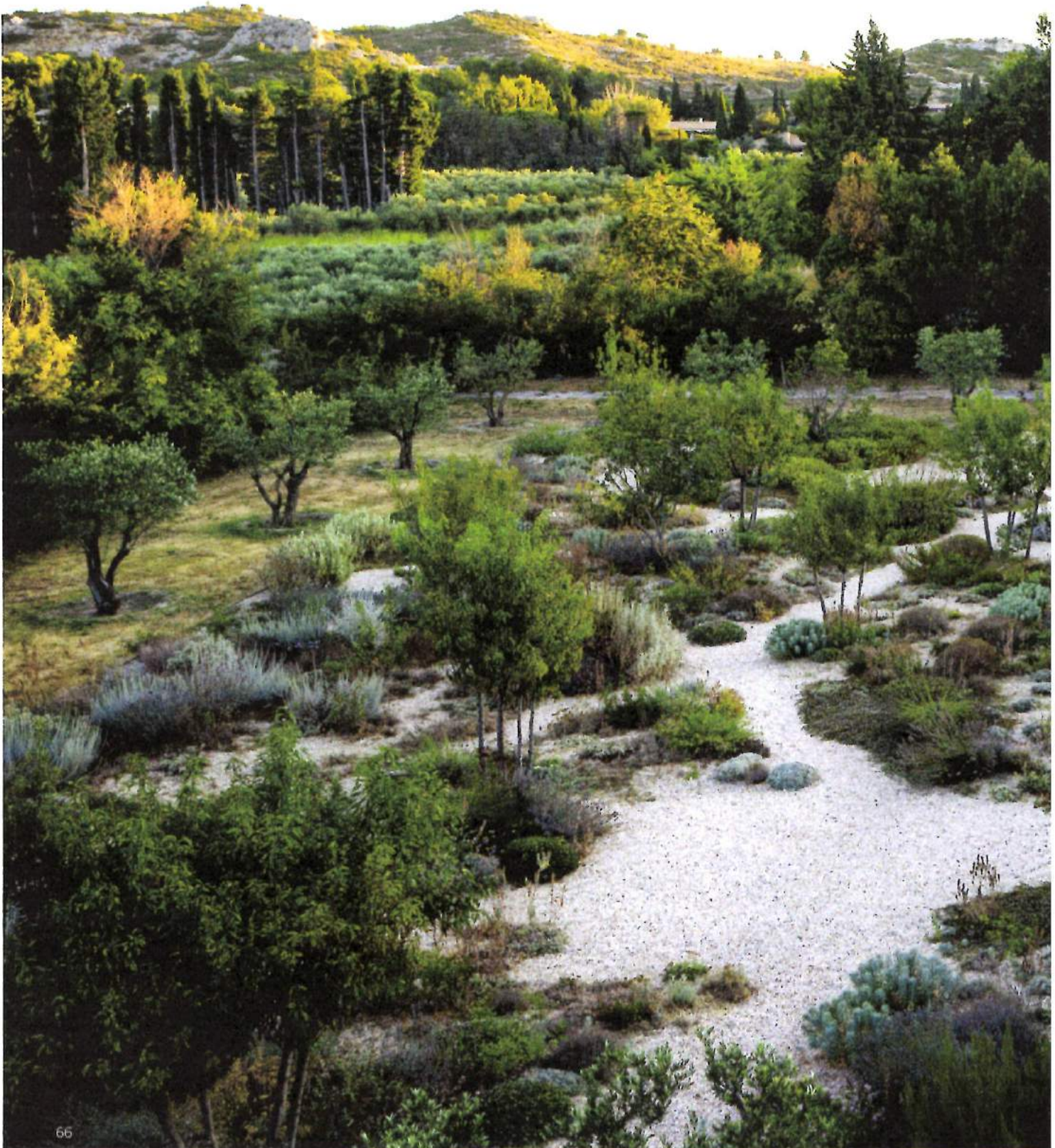
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# Rural retreat

Taking the area's agricultural past as his starting point, British designer James Basson has created a largely irrigation-free Provençal garden with a light touch, using drought-tolerant Mediterranean planting

WORDS TIM RICHARDSON PHOTOGRAPHS CLAIRE TAKACS







## IN BRIEF

**What** Private garden that relies heavily on irrigation-free Mediterranean plants.

**Where** Provence, France.

**Size** Four acres.

**Soil** Clayey loam.

**Climate** Mediterranean.

**Hardiness zone** USDA 9.

In this Provencal garden, James has created a framed area, edged by olive trees and set against the backdrop of the Alpilles mountain range. The planting matrix is a pattern formed by plants such as cistus, artemisia, phlomis, rosemary and lavender, growing beneath a canopy of arbutus, *Pistacia lentiscus* and almond trees.





**S**cape Design, the studio headed by British designer James Basson, has made a name for itself on the Côte d'Azur. Its gardens eschew the traditional 'lavender with everything' style of the region, replacing it with a vocabulary of tough Mediterranean plants selected to combine and thrive in the dry conditions. The concept of the 'plant community' is now well entrenched in gardening, but it's not always a matter of attempting to replicate the local wild habitat. This garden near Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, which James created with Helen Basson and Bruno Torini, shows that agricultural history can have just as potent an influence on the look of the setting for a domestic garden.

"There is a lot of abandoned agriculture in the area," says James. "The property is surrounded by olive groves, with a backdrop of the Alpilles. It's a mix of the agricultural and the natural – almost a scrubland look, with self-seeded almond trees in abandoned fields. In the garden, we have intensified it and evolved it, elaborated upon it and enriched it. Outside the garden, you can see that the habitat is simpler and less dynamic."

James explains that the natural landscape of the valley, set below the dramatic limestone peaks of the Alpilles, would originally have been mixed shrubland, periodically inundated with water as it is on a flood-plain, with willows, alders and poplars. But this was later replaced by agriculture: the olives, fruit trees and old grassland that are there today.

"The 'landscape memory' is grass meadow," he says, adding that the problem with pasture in the Mediterranean is that it looks "very sad and brown" in summer. "There is no evergreen or flowering quality to it," he continues. "Instead we are trying to use the palette of plants that we have become known for. We are used to working on very rocky and barren landscapes, but this part of Provence is different – very flat, ex-arable grassland."

The shuttered farmhouse is a modern replica of a traditional dwelling, set in a four-acre plot. The owners, who are keen horticulturists, wanted to make a garden that reflected the local landscape as much as possible, a place "to learn in as they garden". As James reflects: "That's a very rare thing – a client who is actually going to do the gardening." Having said

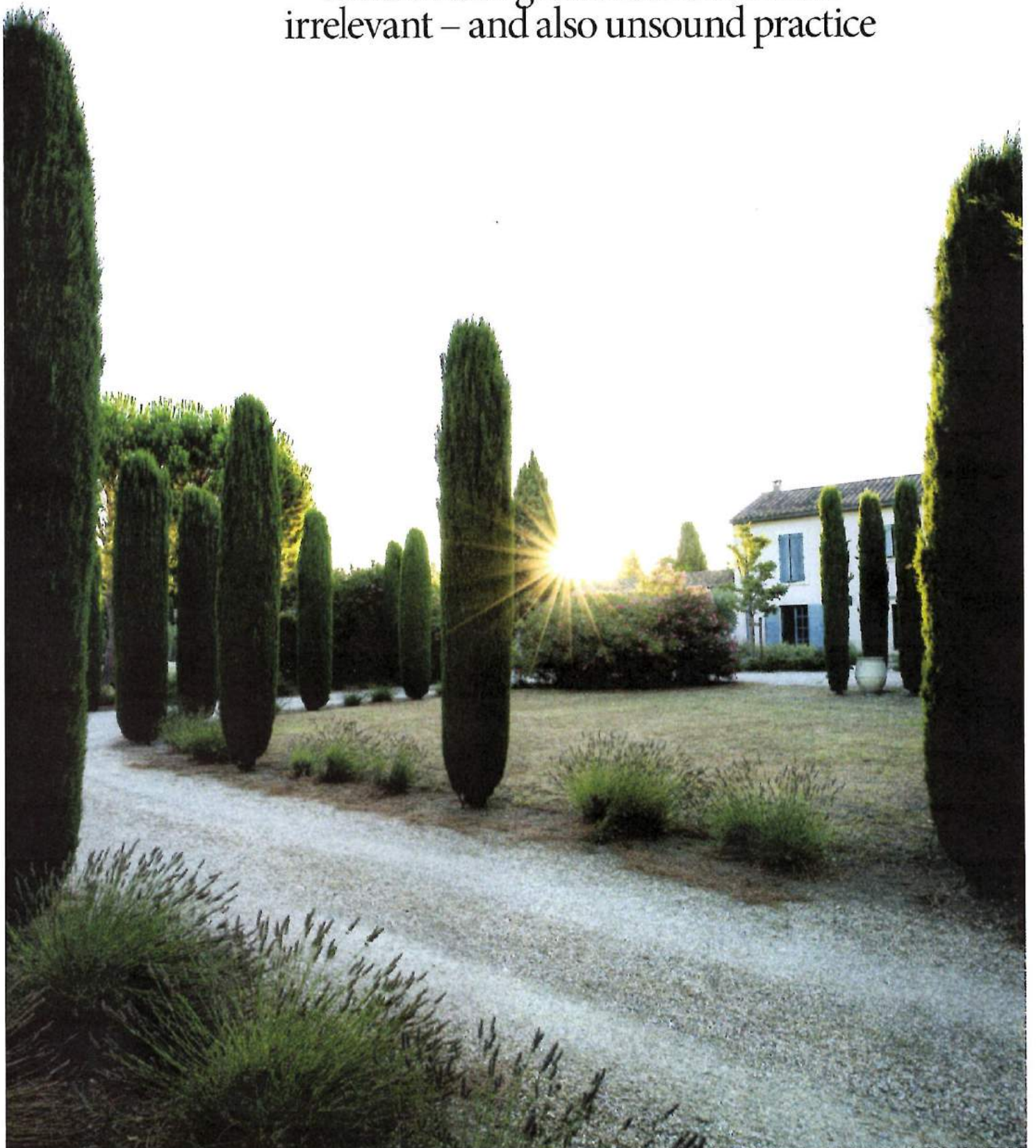
To continue turn to page 74 ▷

**Above** Tonnes of gravel were added to the soil, partly to encourage self-seeding, while 30cm berms were modelled to vary the terrain. Almond trees, with *Euphorbia rigida* at their bases, were planted as bare-root specimens in clusters, to mimic agricultural practice.

**Right** One classic note retained by the owners is the driveway lined by *Cupressus sempervirens* Stricta Group and lavender. The grass is deliberately allowed to turn brown, as this is a no-irrigation garden.



If the lawn goes brown,  
it is totally relevant; it's when it is  
watered and green that it becomes  
irrelevant – and also unsound practice





The key decision was to create a rectangle of planting strongly defined by steel edging and 'framed' by mature olive trees



The steel edge of the 'framed' garden creates a defining boundary, with the grass and olives surrounding it. The planting includes hummocks of santolina, lavender and thyme – the greys and silvers creating interest in high summer when there is little flowering – with *Teucrium fruticans* in the background and a favourite rosemary, 'Miss Jessopp's Upright'.









**Above** The principal garden area is set slightly away from the house, with planting kept low to create what James describes as a ha-ha effect. He has used almond trees in clumps to create a canopy, with the eye drawn down towards lower planting, including bands of several kinds of lavender.



**Below** Seats in the shade of an olive tree are surrounded by tall planting that includes *Clinopodium menthifolia* subsp. *ascendens*, *Phillyrea angustifolia* and *Phlomis italica*. Below these, *Centaurea bella*, *Achillea umbellata* and *Prunella hyssopifolia* have proved successful groundcovers.





**Above** A hedge of *Viburnum tinus* helps to frame the area by the front door. To the side is a specimen nettle tree, *Celtis australis*, which James uses as a shade tree in place of the more "predictable" plane, while nearer the house an existing olive tree also offers shade.



**Below** Among the generally low planting, the upright spires of *Artemisia thuscula* and seedheads of *Salvia* 'Allen Chickering' add points of interest, reflecting the tall Italian cypresses, *Cupressus sempervirens* Stricta Group. They conspire to take the garden through the summer months.





There is a baseline  
of repeated genera  
but we riff on them

▷ that, James's own team of "artist-gardeners", as he calls them, descend on the property four times a year to check on the maintenance regime, which is so important when any attempt is being made to replicate a plant community.

The key decision was to create a principal garden area at one remove from the house: a rectangle of planting set against the mountain backdrop, strongly defined by steel edging and 'framed' by a belt of grass and mature olive trees. Within the rectangle, James has instigated a planting regime that mixes fast- and slower-growing plants. "There is a baseline of repeated genera but we riff on them," he says. "So we have at least 15 different species or cultivars of lavender, 20 salvias, six rosemaries, a dozen santolinas and so on. There are underlying themes, but also huge diversity within each genus. The basic idea is that this evolving landscape will take maybe 30 years to come into its real form."

The fastest-growing plants include *Teucrium hircanicum*, *Euphorbia rigida*, *Clinopodium nepeta* (formerly *Calamintha nepeta*) and *Achillea crithmifolia* – according to James these are "much more herbaceous and in the first years are putting on a show; they fill the ground and keep the weeds down". Then there are faster-growing sub-shrubs, such as *Salvia candelabrum* and *Santolina magonica*, which James is hoping will self-seed. Slower plants include *Juniperus phoenicea* and *Pistacia lentiscus*, or mastic tree. Then, above it all, are the small trees that play in to the landscape locale – *Pistacia terebinthus*, *Arbutus unedo* and clusters of almond trees. These larger plants will soon require close monitoring. "We don't want them to become overbearing, so that they eradicate the diversity. If we are not careful, it might become a small woodland, not this dynamic sub-shrubland."

Around the house is a band of planting that follows the same prescription, with some variation in the shadier areas. Fairly large areas of grass have been retained, but this 'lawn' is never watered. "If it goes brown, it is totally relevant," James says. "It's when it is watered and green that it becomes irrelevant – and also unsound practice." □

**Above** In the courtyard space in front of the house, a fountain pool provides the refreshing sound of water. The planting is designed to appear self-seeded and naturalistic, with *Teucrium flavum* thriving beneath the evergreen oak in the corner.

#### USEFUL INFORMATION

Find out more about Scape Design's work at [scapedesign.com/en](http://scapedesign.com/en)





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## James's 8 top dry garden plants

**1 *Achillea crithmifolia*** James has found this yarrow useful as a way of 'glueing' areas of planting together, though it is "very aggressive" so must be monitored closely. 50cm. USDA 3a-9b†.

**2 *Salvia 'Allen Chickering'*** The seedheads of this salvia are one of James's favourites for late summer and winter. 1.5m.

**3 *Artemisia thuscula*** This was very much an experimental planting and an unknown quantity for James. It is now appreciated for its "verticality and silveriness" throughout summer. 1.2m. RHS H4, USDA 7a-10b.

**4 *Bupleurum gibraltarium*** Throws up wands of lime-green umbels in the summer months. A fresh presence in an arid season. 1.5m.

**5 *Euphorbia rigida*** A key plant both in spring, when its flowerheads contribute a zesty lime-green note, and then from autumn into winter, when it conveys a sense of continuing life. Its ability to self-seed guarantees its longevity in the mix. 60cm. AGM\*. RHS H6, USDA 7a-10b.

**6 *Pistacia lentiscus*** A common sight in many gardens in this part of the world, the mastic tree is a small evergreen native to the Mediterranean. Favoured by James as a structural design element, its healthy green leaves help to persuade his clients that their gardens do not require watering. 1-5m.

**7 *Eryngium amethystinum*** Also known as amethyst sea holly, this fast-growing self-seeder soon stands tall among other plants, its electric blue adding a different colour note in summer. The seedheads are a real star of the autumn garden. 60cm. RHS H5, USDA 5a-9b.

**8 *Dianthus rupicola*** This pink Mediterranean native is one that James feels can perhaps be a little brash, but he has found that it flowers reliably throughout the driest months. 40cm.

†USDA Zone Abbreviations can be found here: <https://www.usda.gov/plant-hardiness>



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