



The *heat* is *on*

Finding plants for his garden that would survive the hot summers of Provence was, for Stephen Smith, a huge creative challenge

THIS PICTURE Luxuriant gardens encircle the secluded pool. Plants such as box, cistus, lavender and euphorbia add shape and interest and can withstand the local extremes of climate. **OPPOSITE, FROM TOP** Bastides like Stephen's were originally country houses owned by people living in the city and often had farmland attached; olive trees are a reminder of centuries of cultivation; old stonework is an important element in the garden.



CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE LEFT *Curtain of Water* fountain by Philippe Cottet; an old stone well top is mounted as a sculptural piece; this rustic doorway gives access to tunnels with water-bearing channels; box provides year-round structure in the formal garden; clipped box and juniper are a foil for the garden's more informal planting.



ABOVE Silver foliage, typical of many drought-tolerant Mediterranean plants, is a feature of the Western Terrace. **BELOW** Sculpted plants reflect the traditions of both East and West.



Garden guide

Special features Formal gardens, topiary, land art-inspired sculpture and landscaping and plants specially chosen for a Mediterranean climate. **Orientation** South- and west-facing slopes. **Soil type** Variable: thin and stony in some parts, heavy clay in others.

Graceful topiary

Used to great effect in both public and private gardens. In south-east America, *Ilex vomitoria* (yaupon) is a stylish alternative to topiaryed *Buxus*, which can fall victim to box blight. Buy plants from Mallet Court Nursery, (01823) 481493; malletcourt.co.uk.



TO LIVE IN PROVENCE is the dream of many, but to garden there is not always a dream. The climate can be harsh, especially for those who have homes up in the hills, because of the relentless summer heat and drought and the possibility of bitter cold air sweeping down from the Alps in winter. "You can only use a limited palette of plants," says Stephen Smith, who has owned Les Chênes, a 17th-century *bastide* (country house), in the area since 1988. Mediterranean gardens make much of resilient evergreens and stone, and both elements are used with passion at Les Chênes, along with modern sculpture to subtly combine the traditional with the contemporary.

When Stephen arrived, the property, with its heritage of ancient oaks and planes, had been uncultivated for 50 years but, for him, one of the attractions of the site was its location. "From every room there is a different view of nature. It was a perfect spot to create a garden in the spirit of those I had seen and loved in Tuscany." His garden is the result of collaborations

with three designers. The first, Nicole de Vésian, was a friend who had worked as a textile designer for fashion house Hermès and, in her retirement, turned to garden design, weaving tapestries out of evergreen foliage and topiary.

Another designer who left his mark was Alain David Idoux, who took up landscape design after a career as an artist and professor of sculpture. From 1991 until his death in 1998, he worked first as an assistant to Nicole de Vésian and then on his own projects. Inspired by what has become known as land art, Alain contributed discreet focal points to the garden, mostly involving stones: stones surrounding trees, a stone circle, or the erection of old carved stones as sculptural pieces. He also introduced Japanese-style planting with cloud-pruned pine trees and junipers – all tough enough to survive the Provençal climate. Alain's gift was, in Stephen's words, "to create structure and planting in large gardens that refer to the landscape beyond the garden".

Since 1998, Stephen has worked with Philippe Cottet to create "a sense of harmony between different elements"; the

garden today is essentially his creation. Philippe, a pharmacist by training, has added new gardens and features, notably a formal garden, including a hill with a terrace to replace a retaining wall that collapsed in heavy rain in 2002, parterres in box and the *Curtain of Water* fountain.

Les Chênes is, for Stephen, very much what the Japanese call a "stroll garden", where a particular route is taken to experience emotions in a particular order. Yet it is a stroll that comes straight from the philosophy of the Renaissance, the period in which the classical European garden took shape. Stephen stresses the progress from "chaos – under the oak trees, which are like supernatural human figures" to the final layout: "a formal garden – the garden of logic and reason". Above all, he feels that the garden "civilises what life is about... the creators of this garden have been my friends and, as I walk through it, I feel as if I am walking with them". ■

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Garden sculpture

Visit Greywalls Garden Exhibition, Gullane, East Lothian, (01820) 842144, until 17 July; or Broomhill Sculpture Park, near Barnstaple, (01273) 850063.