

An autumnal early morning mist blurs the definition between the garden, its structures and the fields beyond (E on plan).

French connection

Chelsea award-winning designer Cleve West gives us an insight into the aims, ideas and outcomes of his design for a private garden in Normandy. Photographs Nicola Browne

THE COTENTIN PENINSULA OF NORMANDY is stirring as we arrive at the iron gates of *Le Taillis*. Rabbits scatter while sheep and goats stare silently through hedge gaps as our vehicle gently winds and crunches down a grit track. A donkey's plangent bray, muted and haunting, cuts through dawn mist as three pyramids loom ghostly from a large pool where muffled reflections of the house bring us to halt. Crows caw. Cocks crow. Church bells mark the start of another day. But no matter how early we arrive Thierry, who looks after the garden at *Le Taillis*, is always there to greet us.

Le Taillis meaning 'The Coppice', (a reference to the pollarded willow much used in the vicinity), is a 500-year-old farmstead that over the last decade has undergone major restoration. The English owners wanted a contemporary garden sympathetic to the old house and its surroundings, some 20 hectares of dairy pasture and orchards that typifies the landscape of rural Normandy. The garden itself is three acres and, to a certain extent, it would have to look after itself so as not to put undue strain on Thierry's management of the grounds and his own smallholding.

The restoration of the house acknowledges historical alterations over the years and it now stands with an 18th-century façade. There is a more sympathetic feel at the rear of the property where the courtyard reflects the original 16th-century design and, almost entirely enclosed by buildings, is typical of most farmsteads of the time that needed some degree of fortification. The owners used local craftsmen and materials wherever possible and were pleased to discover that the skills necessary to restore old buildings were in abundance.

DESIGNING THE GARDEN

I designed the garden, which is now in its fifth year, in collaboration with sculptor Johnny Woodford, who has created other pieces for my gardens. The inspiration for the landscape and the architecture was taken from a sense of austerity more than any particular detail or view. An attempt to 'pretty' would have looked inappropriate. Instead, a simple formal pool is the main feature at the front of the house, which reflects and reinforces the strong architectural presence. Emerging from the pool, the dynamic simplicity of the rusty steel pyramids is not for the faint-hearted but a dramatic adjunct and necessary counterpoise in terms of scale. The client is particularly fond of this feature while, nearer to the house, my own whims takes the form of an animated ribbon of box topiary snaking off to join the serpentine road beyond. Competing for attention is the local church, which not only dominates as a focal point from many parts of the garden, but also structures the working day with its chimes providing a surprisingly comforting signal to rouse, eat and repose.

The garden was constructed by the same local builder who had worked on the house. This helped preserve the techniques in stone-work used elsewhere and retain an element of local distinctiveness. As the ground plan took shape the client would occasionally act with unsettling urgency to implement an idea. A new road (replacing a

- 1 A willow provides a structural focal point on a moated island.
- 2 The flowering thorn, *Crataegus prunifolia* provides year-round garden interest with white flowers in early summer and scarlet berries in autumn.
- 3 Serpentine box hedging snakes its way across the terrace, reflecting the more formal style of the 18th-century frontage to the farmstead (F on plan).
- 4 *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Morning Light' planted to dramatic mass effect as a roundabout (H on plan).
- 5 The umbelliferous white flowers of *Selinum wallichianum* are held high on upright stems that grow to 1.5m tall.

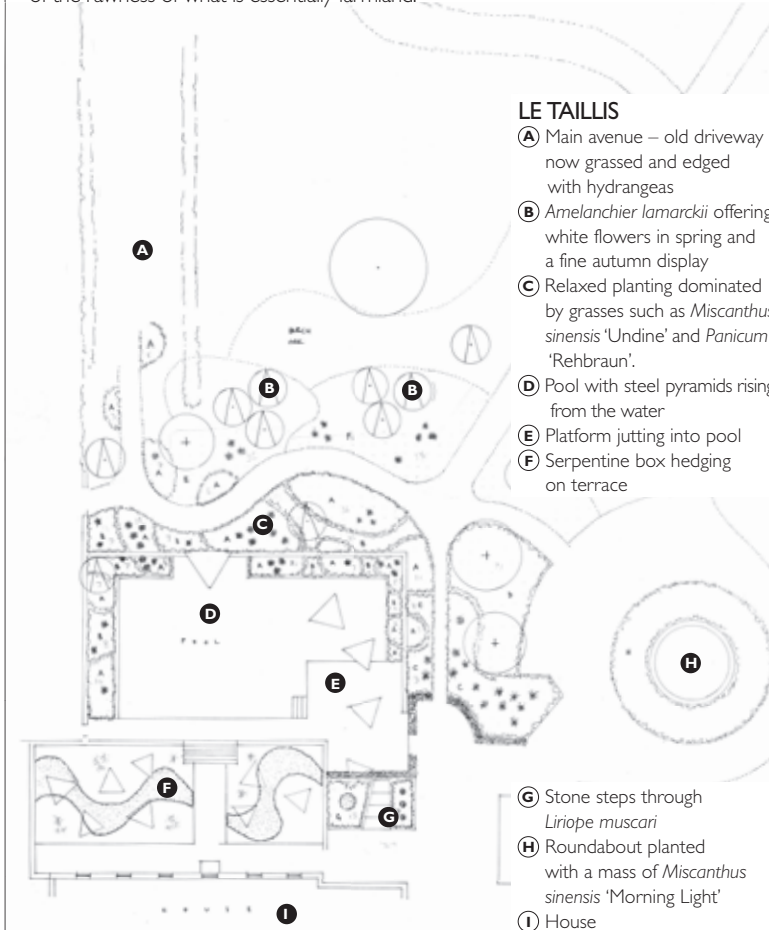


DESIGNER PROFILE

Cleve West began designing gardens in 1990 following a design course at The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. His reputation for innovative garden landscapes based around a creative use of space and harmonious planting was assured when Cleve won gold at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show 2006 for the Saga Insurance Garden – a contemporary herb garden that incorporated native trees and bold sculptural forms.

PLANTING PLAN

Cleve explains some of the thinking behind his planting choices: "Robust grasses and perennials have been used. These self seeders and spreading plants have been allowed latitude enabling the garden to shift in emphasis over the years without needing constant attention. Planting ranges from the formal/minimal/sculptural to the more relaxed, where the aim was not to pretty the space but capture some of the rawness of what is essentially farmland."



PLAN BY CLEVE WEST

One of the yarrows, *Achillea filipendulina* 'Parker's Variety' is a hardy perennial with fern-like foliage and golden-yellow, late-summer flowers.

'The roses planted here have an air of wilful abandonment that works perfectly among grasses and against the local stone'

dishevelled cypress-lined avenue that lost its axis when the front door to the property was moved), was built within three weeks of marking it out by eye. The spoil was used to fill the original avenue and a turf walk created with the existing rhododendrons being replaced by hydrangeas. Oak and yew have been freed from the aligning hedgerow to breathe new life into the avenue and create an intimate footpath to the house.

PLANTING SCHEME

Surrounded by such lush pasture, the rich clay loam is ideal for the chosen mix of grasses and perennials we've chosen. *Anthriscus* 'Ravenswing' flutters among robust greenery of *Kniphofia* 'Percy's Pride' around the pool where colonies of *Nymphaea alba* enjoy the stillness. Beyond and out towards young woodland, islets of kniphofia continue the theme through a sea of self-seeding-cum-spreading perennials such as *Phlomis russeliana* and *Achillea filipendulina* 'Parker's Variety'. *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Undine' punctuates a haze of *Panicum* 'Rehbraun', while allium, sedum and *Sanguisorba officinalis* provide jewels for closer inspection. Nearer the house a low hedge of the plumbago *Ceratostigma willmotianum* defines a simple limestone terrace while foliage and flowers of *Crocsmia* 'Lucifer', berries of *Crataegus prunifolia* and black hips of *Rosa pimpinellifolia* are stark yet vibrant.

Gallica and shrub roses and a number of rare trees (including a dazzling spindle tree) planted throughout the property were chosen specifically by the client. "Look at the hips," he will say, pointing to the bright red flagons of *Rosa* 'Scharlachglut'. "How can you say you don't like roses?" I've always regretted making such a broad-sweeping statement at our first meeting particularly as the roses here have an air of wilful abandonment that works perfectly among grasses and against the local stone.

At the front and rear of the house Woodford has carved doors of elm that invite you to peep into the walled garden before you enter it. Here, steps down to a sunken space command a personal audience with a Teutonic-style, steel water sculpture. Gouda-like slabs of oak (more of Woodford's creations), set in yew hedging, surround this space and provide a stark contrast to grasses and perennials in the lower part of the garden and ease the transition to a view of fields beyond. The walls provide shelter from coastal winds, which can be particularly harsh in winter, and a relatively safe haven for rare breed chickens that keep the garden free of slugs and snails. *Iris*



The flowers of the daylily *Hemerocallis lilioasphodelus* may be short-lived but come in succession throughout the summer.



The original driveway to the house is now a grassed-over pathway (A on plan).

Cleve chose 'robust' perennials that retain a rawness against the structural elements. Here the planting is dominated by achillea and the tall plumes of *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Undine' (C on plan).





- 6 Perfect for a well-drained, sunny spot, *Phlomis russeliana* is a long-flowering self-seeder with sturdy seedheads.
- 7 The steel spheres were originally meant as topiary frames. When this idea didn't fit into the garden's scheme, they were moved to an outlying field where they add intrigue.
- 8 The typical Norman church is visible from much of the garden and affords a traditional rustic appeal that Cleve was keen to retain.
- 9 The long narrow panicles of the grass *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Undine' are tinged with purple, drying to a silvery brown in autumn.
- 10 Cleve used reclaimed rusting farm implements to provide a point of interest to a fence top.

'The dynamic simplicity of the rusty steel pyramids is a dramatic adjunct and necessary counterpoise in terms of scale'

sibirica, angelica and ligularia, thrive in all but the driest summers within a moat that encircles an ancient salix, the largest of the few remaining willows that gave the property its name. *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Gracillimus', hemerocallis and *Selinum wallichianum* add lushness while two old, multi-stemmed ash trees underplanted with *Deschampsia cespitosa* at the garden's centre soften the entrance through a hornbeam arbour to an orchard where sheep graze and perpetuate the rural idyll.

FLEXIBLE APPROACH

Collaboration with the client has been refreshingly fruitful with healthy dialogue and a readiness to consider anything, including spontaneous improvisation when things don't go exactly to plan. This includes metal spheres that were made locally to provide a framework around which yew hedging could be trained. However, the outer rings of the spheres jarred in the walled garden so they were removed and eventually re-located to a field where, with nothing to compete with, the simple forms – much like forgotten farm implements – leave a subtle if curious signature. Now small bonfires are lit in each one, like pagan ritual, to burn off thatch and apples are piled high within them in celebration of the year's harvest.

Plans for the future are not cast in stone. The initial pace has slackened and we are now able to gauge a measure of its character. *Le Taillis* already had its own sense of place. This new layer could take many more years to reach maturity but already there are personal references and memories that resonate enough to make each visit enriching. A visit that may spark several ideas or nothing more than quiet contemplation and a chance to split and edit the spread of the more robust perennials. And of course there are the trees. So far 2,000 have been planted as a buffer zone between the house and the main road. More will be planted this year. Seeing them mature into woodland will, for now, suffice. Thierry, I know, will be more than happy with that. ■

Further information

- Cleve West Landscape Design Navigator House, 60 High Street, Hampton Wick, Surrey KT1 4DB. Tel 020 8977 3522, www.clewest.com
- Turn to page 94 for ideas on gardens you can visit this autumn in Normandy, plus details of our special travel offer with Brittany Ferries.



GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Using sculpture in the garden offers both artistic and structural benefits and is a design element that is integral to Cleve West's use of space. He explains why.



"Structure by way of sculpture and sculptural form (topiary/spheres etc) is important to me as a designer as it adds an extra layer to either accentuate or contrast with the sense of place taking it to another level. It also articulates something about the client sealing their own mark on a space.

Collaborating with sculptor Johnny Woodford has always resulted in dynamic, site-specific solutions. Careful planning is needed to get the balance right between sculptural elements, the landscape and the planting. Addressing such issues early in the concept stage usually adds more punch than when sculpture is used as an afterthought. Good sculpture with the right planting is incredibly satisfying. At the garden in Normandy, it was a three way collaboration between a designer, a sculptor and a client with an open mind but who also had strong ideas of his own." Supplier: **Johnny Woodford** 14 Atlingworth Street, Brighton, Sussex BN2 1PL. Tel 07770 758393.

