

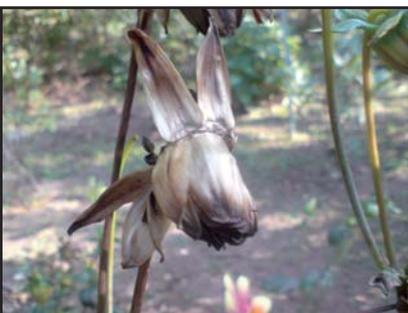
# *Les Jardins de Drulon*



Les Jardins de Drulon near Loye-sur-Arnon in central France is a hidden gem. The castle dates back to the 15th century but the buildings and the gardens had fallen into disrepair until the mid-90s, overrun with brambles and weeds. The main structure was the first area to be tackled; once this had been completely restored, work began in earnest on the surrounding landscape.

The garden consists of a number of garden rooms, ranging from more formal areas nearer the main chateau to more open, naturalistic areas as you explore further afield. Coupled with a huge array of flowers and plants, that give seasonal interest from early spring through to late autumn, are spaces that contain a variety of contemporary sculptures and other installations.

You are greeted at Drulon along an avenue of oak trees, before passing through a small orchard area with borders composing mainly of dahlias. There are huge arrays of dahlias at Drulon, which change year on year, as the seeds are collected and mixed together to cross pollinate them before re-sowing the following spring.



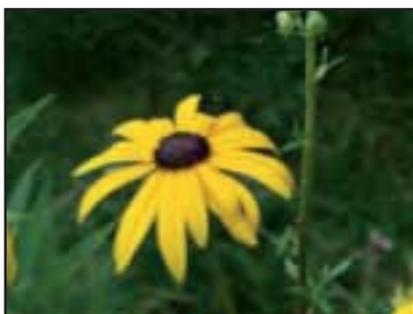
Once you are in the garden, you start your journey by entering the flower garden. This is one of the most formal areas of the site, which is sub-divided into 15 dependent on colour.

There are over 100 varieties of rose in the flower garden, with climbing roses scaling the side of the chateau and covering the pergolas, which borders  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the space. The garden was full of colour until mid-october and the scents carried around the area, particularly later in the day once the sun had warmed up the garden.

There was a lot of rose pruning to be carried out in the Flower garden. Some of the specimens had not been pruned for years.



The next area that you enter is the chamber garden; it is split into 9 different chambers. There is a strong evergreen structure consisting of dense shrubbery, which accentuates the colours of the asters, irises and dahlias.

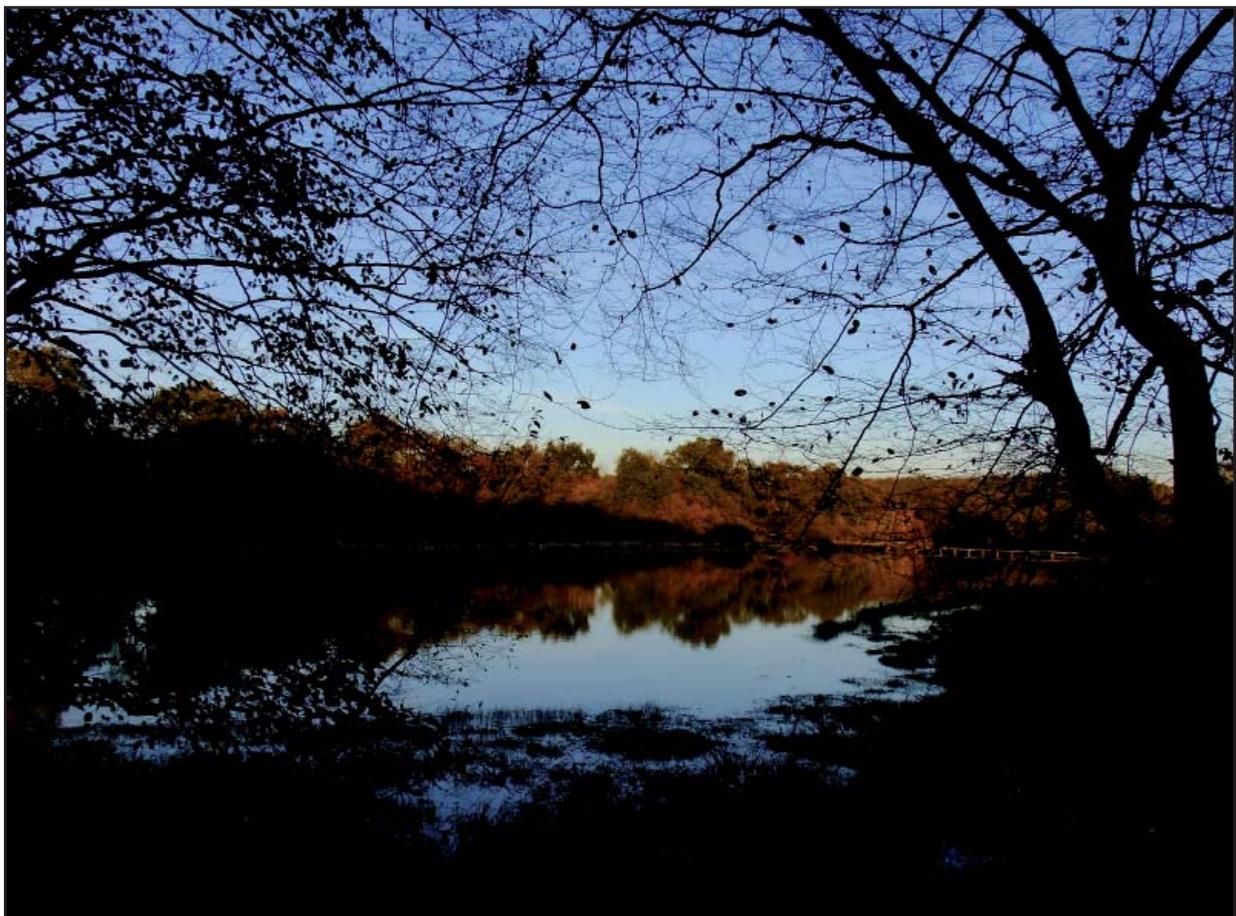


There are also some interesting installations, including a playful space which consists of merry-go-round horses. As the weather changed and the autumn set in the colours changed to decorate the areas with yellows, oranges and purples and the floor filled up with a variety of wild mushrooms.



Following the path through the chamber garden will bring you back around to the Flower garden or alternatively you can exit the chamber garden and make your way into the Wild Garden or 'L'Espace Natural'.

The atmosphere is completely different upon entering the Wild Garden. Soft light filters through the trees as you wander down the pathway, with glimpses out to the surrounding landscape. Ancient oaks and hornbeams frame the track on the way down to a large, shallow lake. The climate changes so much throughout the year that the lake can almost completely dry out in the summer and freezes so hard in the winter that you are able to ice skate on it.



Piet and Nanou have deliberately left this area relatively untouched by human hands. There are some subtle interventions, such as the dyke at one end of the lake and the bridge that traverses it at the other end, but on the whole there has been very little extra planting done in this space. They carefully manage the forest areas and use any felled wood to create benches or put it to other use within the garden.

Bearing left at this point will take you into a Fern Valley, with species such as *Asplenium scolopendrium*, *Matteuccia struthiopteris*, *Polystichum setiferum*.

There are also a variety of brightly flowering rhododendrons in the spring, although in the autumn they formed a rich, green back-drop.



If you follow the path around the lake, you will eventually return to the castle through a large wildflower meadow, although it was not looking its best by the time I arrived in France.



Upon re-entering the chamber garden and the flower garden, if you take a left at the château's tower, you enter the secret garden, or 'Le Jardin Secret', inside the courtyard of the château's kitchen.

This enclosed space contains the old bread oven, a pigeon coup and 2 ponds. The cellar also contains water, and is used to house exhibitions that experiment with light, as it is the perfect setting given the reflective qualities of the space.



At the time when I visited, it seemed like it needed a lot of work to restore it to its former glory but there was great potential to create a magical, contemplative space or even restore it as a productive kitchen garden, given its sheltered aspect and proximity to the chateau's kitchen.

I worked a lot in this space, pruning back the hydrangeas and cutting back at enormous climbing rose that had started to damage the roof tiles and guttering.



The main courtyard in front of the chateau leads you through to the Bacchus Garden.

Designed as an ode to fertility, it contains grape vines, apple trees, pear trees and blossoming cherries. A geometrical, structural backdrop of *Taxus baccata* gives extra height to the space, creating a separation between this area and the courtyard that leads into it.

Lower lying box hedging creates a physical, if not visual, boundary with the Paenan garden.



The Paenan Garden is the most recent of all the different areas at Drulon. It follows the same geometry as the Bacchus Garden and the 2 spaces seem to flow together and overlap in places.

There are over 250 varieties of grasses, peonies and shrubs within this area, with pastel colours displayed in the spring followed by an array of deeper, hotter colours as the seasons progress.

Throughout the summer dahlias, roses and ornamental grasses dominate the space, chosen mainly for Piet's fondness for colour.

The majority of the work I carried out at Les Jardins de Drulon consisted of hedge cutting, rose pruning and shrub pruning. With such a large garden to maintain and a relatively small team to carry out the work, there was a lot of maintenance to catch up on!

### Hedge Cutting

Established hedges require trimming to keep them dense and compact. Formal hedges require more frequent trimming than informal hedges.

New hedges require formative pruning for their first couple of years after planting. Formative pruning is usually carried out in winter or spring.

After this, maintenance trimming is carried out, usually once a year for informal hedges and twice a year for formal hedges. Maintenance trimming is generally carried out between spring and summer, although at Drulon we were hedge trimming into the autumn as there were so many hedges to get through! We exclusively used petrol hedge trimmers, keeping the hedge-cutting blade lubricated using vegetable oil as it is not harmful to the hedge.

In general, most problems with the machine involve either the air filter or the fuel mix. The petrol machines run on 2-stroke fuel, which is a petrol and oil mixture at a ratio of 50:1. If the mixture is not correct, the machine will tend to suffer from power drop-off and the excess oil won't burn, causing build up around the engine. We also always carried out visual check before using them, checking the machine casing and blade before and checking the air filters after use.

### Rose Pruning

The purpose of pruning is to speed up the process of new shoots developing to replace the old, weakened ones. There are certain rules, depending on the rose type, but certain principles apply to all roses.

It is essential to have the right tools; sharp, good quality secateurs are a must and long-handled pruners or a fine-toothed pruning saw are also useful. It is often advisable to wear tough protective gloves when dealing with roses as well.

When pruning, it is important to make a clean angled cuts above a bud that faces in the direction that you want the new shoot to develop towards; this is usually an outward facing bud.

Like most pruning, it is important to remove any dead, damaged or diseased shoots, as well as anything that is crossing or crowded. It is important to remove disease and to enable light and air to get into the centre of the plants.

Prune roses when they dormant or semi-dormant; this is usually between autumn leaf fall and when the buds are starting to come in early spring. Sometimes it may be necessary to prune a rose outside of this time period but it will severely check its growth. You should not prune roses during periods of frost or severely cold weather as the bud below the cut may be damaged and the shoot may therefore die back.

## Shrub Pruning

The main reasons for shrub pruning are as follows: -

- i) To remove disease
- ii) To improve vigour
- iii) To improve air flow
- iv) To encourage flowering
- v) To create an aesthetically pleasing shape

In general, for most of the shrubs that we prune, such as Hydrangeas, we remove any branches that are dead, damaged or diseased to begin with. After that, we tend to tackle any crossing branches. Once this has been achieved the shrub is normally starting to look a lot better but we are generally looking to reduce the shrub by about 1/3 all over.

When making cuts, it is important that the tools are sharp enough to leave a straight, clear cut, with no ragged edges. We normally cut at a 45 degree angle, sloping away from the bud. This ensures that rainwater will slide off, thus helping to prevent the onset of fungus or disease.

There are no hard and fast rules as to when to prune, but again, there are some generalities which you can follow. For shrubs that bloom in summer or autumn on the current year's growth, it is normally best to prune in late winter or early spring; for shrubs that flower in spring on the previous year's growth, it is usual to prune them after they have flowered. If they are pruned in the correct manner at an appropriate time, the shrub should heal its wounds without damage from frost, insects or disease.

Before pruning anything I was not familiar with (which is still quite a long list!), I would seek advice from someone more experienced or I would research its specific needs in a book.

If I was to be asked to prune a specific rose, I would ask for advice or look up its specific pruning requirements in a reliable book.

In the 3 months I was at Les Drulon and was able to consolidate the skills I had learnt in the preceding year, add to them and improve my spoken French. It is a garden that I will remember with fondness and hope to return there in the future.

James Brennan