

# Claude Monet Foundation – Munn Internship

A month as an intern in Monet's Garden, Giverny, France.  
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## Introduction

Studying Horticulture with Plantsmanship HND at Royal Botanic Gardens of Edinburgh has presented some unique opportunities along the way. Having just finished my second year, I have learnt not to miss any chances of potential plant venturing, and so replied immediately to an email from the Claude Monet Foundation during a break between classes. The month-long Munn voluntary internship provides a full-on horticultural immersion into the workings of Monet's garden by providing seasonal voluntary placements in rural picturesque village of Giverny. This report aims to explore what I did within the garden and my findings within the local landscape that influenced Monet, his gardeners as well as the current head gardener, Jean-Michel Avisard. I would spend the month of June working an allotted 6 hours a day with as many extra hours as I could wish for. I would be in the garden for 5 days a week and, with residence 50 yards away from the garden, there would be no excuses for lateness at the 7am work day starts. Going straight into intensive bedding removal and replanting I realised taking that coffee in the morning to snap into much-needed focus was very much required.



Figure 1 The main garden's climbing rose frames leading up to the house

## Aims and Objections

Being a student for the last couple of years living in the centre of Edinburgh, a working break abroad was greatly needed. The magnitude of beauty both within the garden and local countryside was somewhat of overwhelming beauty and held an embracing serenity. I discovered it would take me at least a week to diffuse its charm of being completely dazed by its wide scope wilderness and untamedness. My time would be spent working and soaking up everything the garden had to offer, whilst also discovering the local flora, fauna and cultural aspects. I would be working on rotation between the water garden and main garden as they are slit up into different teams. This served as a full perspective of the garden's processes as

a whole and revealed differences in operations from those I knew. With the pressures of studying and working in a very busy garden I found exploring the surrounding countryside by running, walking and cycling alone would fulfil my weekends and free time enough. In the quiet lull of evenings, the garden, after closing hours was a sacred sanctuary of pure colour and light splendour.



Figure 1.2 The opening of a delicate bearded iris

### The Garden Impression

On first arrival, at the turn of May into June a profusion of bearded Irises in all their entrancing forms and colours hits intensely. Ethereal fringed delicacies of lighter mauve tones like 'Celebration Glory' added with the intensity of darker cultivars like 'Titan's Glory' saturate the garden. Having just got off the plane a couple of hours previous to my first garden meeting it was an almost overpowering experience visually. Looking across the borders that form Monet's impressionist canvas having been brought up with his paintings since childhood was a surreal experience.

The garden is filled with curious tourists who were asking primarily where the house and shop were, with the odd plant question. Besides the swathes of irises, the main tourist plant attractions were ornamental *Allium* 'Globemaster', the many roses (of which the gardeners could not identify), both tame *Papaver rhoeas* and impactful *Papaver somniferum*, and *Digitalis purpurea*. The transformative period of the turning of Irises in my second week was a welcome tonal shift. Handing power over to lower key colour players such as classic *Centaurea cyanus*, *Veronicastrum virginicum*, *Scabiosa columbaria*, and eye-catching *Phlox paniculata* was a pleasing calmness.

## The Water Garden

My first work position was in the water garden, which for me was the highlight of the whole experience working there. Billowing willow trees reaching over the lake with water reflecting their rich silhouettes, along with beautiful flowering *Nymphaea*, was a delight. Little did I know on arrival was how much effort went into maintaining that clear mirror-like water reflection until later that first day. The three-strong team and I began taking out seasonal annuals (planted densely in both gardens) that create never-ending carpets of colour. Replacements came in the form of *Viola*, *Petunia*, and *Salvia* with bountiful *Begonia* to reward visitors with a new display. This is what most of the work involved so it allowed me to hone a timely digging and planting technique with my hand trowel: holding the trowel vertical and bringing the soil towards me as I dug. The 7am start allowed for working along the main paths without being trampled on, but there were always other groups such as artists and VIP plantspeople getting a (much needed) out of hours look around the garden. The garden quickly filled up at the opening hour of 9 o'clock and with a nearby port in Vernon, busloads of tourists would arrive in swarms- allowing people to get a good look at the plants is pivotal to fathering the garden's global appreciation. Looking over the pond from the famous green bridge is a completely different experience in the quiet hours than when it is chock-a-bloc with tourists. Overhanging *Wisteria* and evening-scented *Cestrum nocturnum* gave it all those

memorable feels on the Japanese bridge.



Figure 1.3 Digitalis' perspective of the main pond

After brisk mornings of taking out and re-planting borders, we set to work on maintenance tasks such as dead heading, cutting back, pruning roses etc. After the generous hour and a half lunchbreak, on my first afternoon I was met with the task of pond cleaning- which to date is my most exciting and thrill-feeding task in gardening. Standing on the boat's front hatch in true gondola-style poise, carefully sweeping the traditional rowboat, featured in the water paintings, across the pond using only a net. Navigation around the water avoiding *Nymphaea* flowers with a hundred people watching was something of a skill that clicked once you into the gondola driving frame of mind. The net is used to skim off surfacing algae, plant debris and dead lily leaves

that mask the pure reflection of the sky along with weeping *Salix babylonica* surrounding the pond. On the rainy days, the *Nymphaea* flowers were more impactful due to the grey sky above and profound water reflection catching the soft pinks and creams of their colouring.

The weather took quite a turn after the first couple of days of settled weather. On Wednesday we were kept rejuvenated by a very heavy downpour which lasted all day. This renowned and extremely heavy rain would return a number of times during my visit. Giverny, being at the foot of the hills, storms would bring severe flash flooding, bringing the main street to mid-calf height in water depth on these occasions. Returning from lunch break on Friday of the first week, after two nights of stormy conditions, there was huge a groan from the garden followed by screams. Working around the corner of the pond, I saw one of the huge weeping willows, around 150 years old, swing into the water. Luckily nobody was hurt where it lay fallen over a path busy with tourists only minutes prior. Not even a minute passed when a neighbouring willow also fell. A very nerve-shaking afternoon continued as I witnessed the health and safety at work in France is very much behind British standards! No helmets or hi-vis vests was perfectly fine for the team as we tackled the mammoth job of tree dismantling with chainsaws. The whole experience of witnessing these living iconic specimens to having them removed from the garden landscape in a flash brought an uneasy stirring of emotions.



Figure 1.4 A view over some statuesque *Cyperus papyrus* to the huge *Salix* whose massive branch fell

The garden is not without some unwelcome animal intrusions, *Ondatra zibethicus*, the North American muskrat, nibbles on young shoots of *Nymphaea*. The water garden team combats this by trapping them and sadly disposing of them. This was a bit of an awakening to the background 'goings on' of the garden. Ribits of invasive bullfrog, *Lithobates catesbeianus*,

took over the pond early in morning and dusk hours, creating a cacophony of deep reverberating voices exotic to my hears.

The team also covers the beds outside of the garden that run along the street-side perimeter of the garden, both sides of 'Chemin du Roy'. It was nice to work here to gain an appreciation of the difference this planting made to the street's visual mood, and people's moods. Work mainly involved tying up, weeding and dead heading whilst getting out the way of the swarms of tourists.

Aside from the tree incidents, the tranquillity and soft colours of the water garden were a delight and soul-feeding experience after a period of student stresses. Although hoatching with eager eyes, as a gardener I got sucked into the plants.



Figure 1.5 A typical border in the water garden

The calming sound of never-ending birdsong was a joy and one I didn't fully appreciate until I left. The highly admired *Fagus sylvatica* 'Purpurea', was a popular point of identification questioning by tourists, and whose branches always held some wings of flighted song for accompaniment when working close by. The shaded veil over the woodland-type garden

made for a calming effect, taking away the glare of many cameras and watching eyes which faded during working. This shade of security wasn't there for me in the main garden, so it took a bit of effort for me to readjust my level of attentive focus to a more intense level of surroundings.



Figure 1.6 *Digitalis* portrait view from a shaded woodland border of the garden

## Main Garden

On my second week, I dutifully moved into the main garden, though I would have readily remained as resident master of the pond waters- and very happily too. The contrast in formality of planting compared to the water garden is pretty stark and struck harder after working hard in it for a week. There is also a completely different planting formula and bolder colour array. Arrangement of these packed borders laid out in a formal grid-system achieves the rich fullness of Monet's palette when looking across the garden. These are built by a layering approach in each border, splitting them into three tiered sections left to right; (public) front, middle, back. The beds also contained much more consistent height in them to achieve the strong colour and soft plant architecture frameworks shown in Monet's paintings. A formal system, easy to understand in terms of the planting, very different to the less systematic approach of the Water Garden which, of course, abided by the more serpentine winds of nature's course.



Figure 1.7 The large dipstick depth of colour and shape produced by ornamental *Allium* rightly grabs your attention

Much time was spent dead-heading the pink and red *Pelargonium* beds in front of Monet's house- a long and painstaking task but rewarding in the end. The wet weather of Normandy not helping their flowering longevity at all, as the plant's waxy coat allows water to just sit on the flowers to rot them. The saving grace was their delicate smell penetrating the air to distract you from many eyes of visitors queued up along the beds to enter the house. It was here that we received the most compliments and gracious thank you's for the work done in the garden to make it so beautiful. It was lovely to hear so many heartfelt words of affection people had for the garden.



Figure 1.8 *Pelargonium* beds fronting the house before opening hour

I had no idea many paths and borders were shut off to visitors, so it was a pleasant surprise to hear this. This made sense to allow for work to be done without being interrupted directly by visitors. I learnt that even holding telescopic secateurs on historic roses will not prevent a prodding tap followed by someone speaking at you with a question- a steady hand, balance, and some upper body muscle was developed in my time spent there.



Figure 1.9 A soft palette after the Iris has finished blooming lead to *Papaver* dominated beds lined by freshly clipped *Rosea* topiary

## Surrounding Giverny

The very wild '*tres sauvage*' countryside beyond Giverny, within the hills that stretched far and winding, were covered in untouched thicket and woodland. It was a spectacle for the eyes when one is so used to managed woods and forestland. Even arable land, reached once you surfaced the top of a long calf-warming hillside, was fringed with wild borders and companion plantings seemed the norm. Colourful mixtures including *Papaver rhoeas*, *Echium vulgare*, *Brassica napus*, and *Cirsium arvense* were both used as field margins, and allowed to infringe and grow through the main crop. Biodiversity awareness and an understanding that this was a positive inclusion in farming sustainably were apparent throughout the landscape.

Away from the tourist-adorned town filled with hustle and bustle, quiet rough tracks amongst fields, thicket and woodland brought a myriad of wildlife. Hares, roe deer, kestrels and even red kites were to be seen at almost every outing I made into the wild. It was obvious to me that the density of persecution on these species was much less than what I'm used to and what I have been forced to witness in south-west Edinburgh. Almost running over a badger, was the closest I've ever been and would like that meeting to remain so- a heart-stopping affair. Luckily, he made only a grumbling chatter of annoyed noises before scuttling away. *Anacamptis pyramidalis*, *Orchis purpurea*, *Spiranthes spiralis* posed as temptresses along the rough old tracks, which, never-ending in length, led to ongoing discoveries. It is my luck that I have a very well-honed sense of direction that somehow directs me back home even in foreign terrain.



Figure 1.10 One of the many colourful horse fields outside Giverny



Figure 1.11 One of the many colourful mixed field margins above the hills outside Giverny

## Trip Conclusion

The magnitude of beauty and feeling of serenity within a landscape filled within the riches of wildness was an endless delight. I improved my practical skills and intuitivism within the garden, along with teamwork skill development in a foreign environment. Normandy speaking dialect was very different to my known French but I happily made efforts in picking up conversations in French, unlike that of my peers. The whole experience had a great impact on my confidence both in and outside the garden. Exploring and discovering flora and fauna in the local countryside was hugely rewarding. Living that childish sense of discovery, those serene pleasures we can pass by when we are busying away in our daily lives. I achieved this sense of undiluted elation every day while I was there and continue to try and carry this on today. Learning, and going beyond my comfort zone this experience very much provoked, and I continue to reap the rewards. Saying only that I am hugely thankful for being able to go there would be a gross underestimation of the benefits I am still reaping from it.

## Budget Information

With the internship stay headed by the Claude Monet Foundation, interns received onsite accommodation and a stipend of €250, which covered meals. Flights from Edinburgh to Paris accounted for £290 in total, as there were some last-minute family events that occurred late on, this made me have to book them later than I would have liked. Other expenditure and travel to and from Giverny to Charles de Gaulle airport was covered by me personally.

## Acknowledgments

Receiving money for flights from the Merlin Trust made a huge difference in my ability to enjoy my time there without having the stress of thinking how I was going to pay for it. I would like to also thank Jan Huntley who organises the volunteers in Giverny, as well as everything else she does, she made me feel very welcome from the very start. I am immensely grateful for getting the chance to have had this extraordinary gardening and life experience.



Figure 1.12 The purple makings of the front face of a main border in a cold colour bed