

Trip to France May 10th – May 24th 2024

Working in Monet's Garden, Giverny and Visiting other Gardens in Paris

By Anya Digby

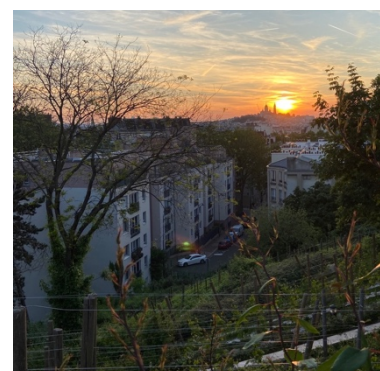


Introduction

This trip to France was intended to compare gardens in France with those in the UK. France is famous for its gardens – the formality of some (Versailles, Château de Villandry) springs to mind, with geometric shapes and immaculately clipped hedges. Whilst at the same time, the Gardens of Giverny are one of the most visited gardens in the world, a completely different style of garden – more like a living painting I was intrigued to see how these two different styles of garden compared. I knew of the exchange between Giverny and the National Trust and couldn't pass up the opportunity to apply in the hope of spending time working in the garden. It seemed to also make sense to try and fit in some other gardens as far as I could whilst there. My initial plan to visit Versailles changed, however, and due to train issues on the weekend I was meant to return, I had to cut my trip a bit short, leaving me two days less than I had initially planned. I did, however, manage to visit Chateau Chantilly, along with other more formal gardens, detailed in the report, instead.

Paris

I arrived in Paris on the Eurostar on Friday evening, heading straight from work at the end of a particularly hot week in May. On arrival, I checked in to my hostel and took a walk around the area I was staying – finding a little community garden on a hill with views over vines, apartments and in the very distance, Montmartre. It was a lovely evening, light noticeably late. With a full itinerary the following day, however, I didn't stay up too long.



My first full day in France, I dedicated my morning to a visit to the Jardin du Luxembourg. A 17th century garden, I was interested to see its similarities to Ham, my previous workplace. Created in 1612 by Marie de Medici, then the Queen of France, who wanted an Italian style palace reminiscent of her childhood in Italy. The gardens stretch 25 hectares, within it are 106 statues, an ancient orchard, apiary, orangerie, fountain, large octagonal pond, forest, greenhouses with orchid collection, rose garden, flower beds and hundreds of tree varieties.



I arrived early, and as I left at around midday it was getting busier. Despite its formality, it really struck me how much it was used as a place of recreation – people were jogging, reading, enjoying the sunshine, there were tennis courts, petanque and chairs which people could move as they wished. It was interesting to see the Versailles style planters as we had at Ham with *Citrus aurantium*, *Punica granatum*, *Phoenix canariensis* in them. The oldest of these



trees are estimated to be between 250-300 years old. With each one labelled, and with family and origin, this gave more of a botanical feeling.

I really loved the orchard (pictured right) which, unfortunately, was locked to visitors. Lots of it surrounded by a huge kiwi tree, the 'Collection du Verger' has over 600 ancient varieties of apples and pears, trained in a variety of ways.



As early as 1650, the monks who lived across from the garden, and practiced arboriculture, collected, trained, bred and looked after these trees to the point that in the 18th



century it was an internationally recognised collection. Unfortunately, many of the older varieties have been lost over time, but research is being carried out to try and retrieve them. Those which have been are signed with a little image of a monk. See picture left. With a thousand plants, the trees needed to be trained to fit in the small space and to ensure high yield. There were varieties I



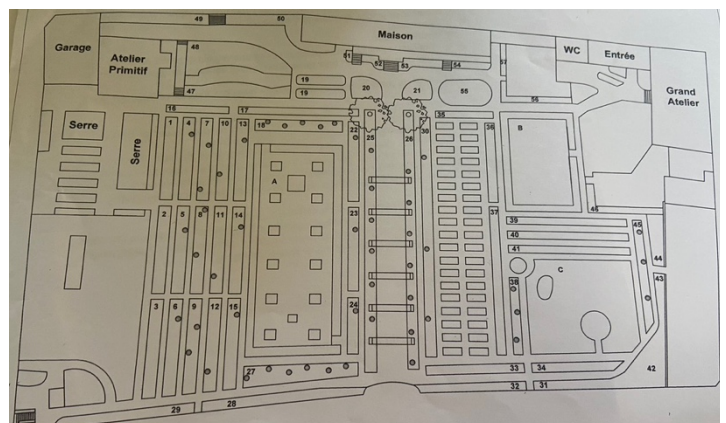
recognised from the 17th century kitchen garden at Ham House.

Giverny

I took the train from Saint Lazare to Vernon-Giverny, and from there a bus to the just outside the garden. It had been a very busy weekend (good weather and a holiday in France) and people had queued for up to four hours to go in the garden! Crowds still filled the streets of Giverny when I arrived at 5, so I was grateful to be able to hide away behind the scenes with the other students and the intern co-ordinator.

The garden

There are eleven gardeners covering four sections of responsibility (water garden, east, west and propagation). My two week work schedule was organised so I would spend a few days in each of the



three sections of the garden. Two parts (Clos Normand and Bassin) are separated by a road, connected with an under passage, and aside from the obvious difference of the lake in one side, the planting styles are also distinctive. The Clos Normand (Monet's house side) is far more formal in its organisation. A grid system which creates a colour palette, the beds are numbered. Not the most exciting picture, but I hope the map of how the garden is laid out demonstrates this more clearly than I can explain. The water garden is less rectangular in its bed structures and looser in its colour schemes.

The colours and plants have been selected based on photos showing what the house and garden would have looked like when Monet lived there. The main paths are accessible to the public, the smaller (in between the 'paint palettes') are roped off. This means that these areas can be protected from the sheer footfall, and also that at peak times, there are parts of the garden that can easily be worked in.

I visited the garden for the first time early on Sunday morning, before visitors arrived (I found out it was 700,000 in the six months the garden is open). The overall impression is breath taking: swathes of purples (Varieties of *Allium*, *Iris*, *Digitalis purpurea*, *Lunaria annua*) peachy yellows (Irises, roses) whites (*Lunaria annua*, *Eremerus*, *Digitalis*) and greens in the morning light, punctuated by bright spots of red from self-seeded poppies. Monet carefully selected plants to ensure a continuous display of colours throughout the year, combining both his passions: art and horticulture. He enjoyed playing with colour and perspectives – using pastel colours behind deeper colours to create depth, and using complimentary colours together to create contrast. As the above map shows the beds running in pairs down the length of the garden – these were organised as a 'paint box' with white at the bottom, yellow above, followed by orange, red, pink, purple.

I was told that the gardeners were concerned that there wasn't enough colour – things were about two weeks ahead of normal and the tulips had finished before the summer flowers (roses and pelargoniums) were fully under way. From my perspective, there was definitely enough, and the variety of greens was incredible.



Heights, perspectives, creating pictures through spaces between plants – the whole space is a piece of art. Monet was really influenced by Japan, and had a collection of Japanese art in his house. You can see this inspiration in the garden, with the bridge and the waterlilies. Now there are further nods to this influence with bonsai-style pruning of some of the trees.

The water garden was probably my favourite place to work. A serene and reflective place, it felt a bit wilder than the other side with bigger trees and the feeling that the space went on for ages. My trip was perfectly timed to see the iconic bridge covered with *Wisteria sinensis*; the *Nymphaea* were just coming into flower and the overhanging branches of *Salix babylonica* cascaded over the water.

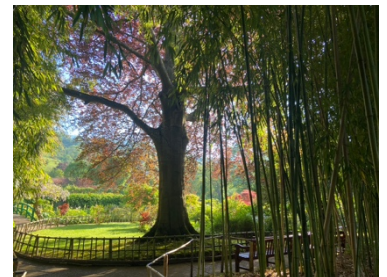


Two boats are used to take algae off the pond, taking care to avoid the clusters of lily pads. When looking at pictures from the time, it is clear that Monet kept the lake clear (to create the best reflections) and with the waterlilies in groups (to create his preferred spots of colour). I loved going out on one of the boats with the net and clearing the pond. After the initial fears of falling in had subsided, the peace and meditative nature of this task meant that time went by extremely quickly.

As well as clearing the pond, planting jobs in the water garden were also necessary. I found the beds were quite waterlogged, particularly those right on the lake. Some planting was easier to reach from the water



and so we would put trays of plants in the boat and then plant from there. There was one spot with a huge copper beech (*Fagus sylvatica purpurea*) which I thought was really special. Not the most stereotypical of views in this part of the garden but I loved the majesty of the tree and the colour of the light through the leaves. The bamboo, acers and bridge from here and the moss used in the place of grass (the shade



from the tree meant grass struggled under here) add to the Japanese feel of this area.



Although the gardeners had their designated on a couple of occasions, the whole garden needed to ensure the completion of a task visitors. One of these was to re-do the beds of the house – previously *Myosotis sylvatica* these needed to be replaced with pink and red pelargoniums (the exact varieties that Monet and propagated by cuttings). The head tended to distribute the plants (approximately every three pink) in the beds for us to plant. We finished just as the were arriving at nine o'clock.

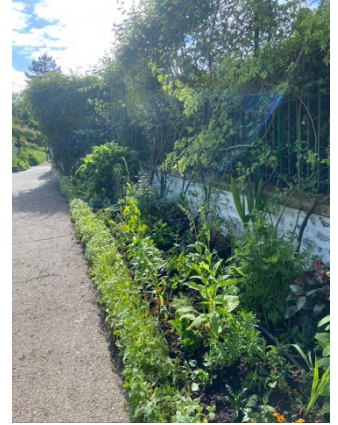


sections, team was before just in front and *Tulipa*, had, found gardeners one red for visitors

My time in the West side of the garden was predominantly spent replanting the border which runs parallel to the road– taking out *Primula*, *Erysimum* and any remaining tulips. The benefit of the Linnean naming system was really apparent in the daily tasks! And I learnt other useful phrases and nouns. The idea of the border (just to the right as visitors arrive) was to be a colour development from light yellow with splashes of white through to yellow, gradually becoming more orange with touches of dark orange and red. At this point, the responsibility switches to the East team and they continue the colours from orangey red to deeper red: mostly annuals – *Calendula*, *Amaranthus*, *Tagetes*, *Gazania*, *Helianthus* and the perennials were *Abutilon*, *Dahlia*, *Rudbeckia*. As before, it was speed planting! Making sure the plants were also in correctly – front facing, not in lines, trying to create triangles and leaving about a hand span between plants.



The lead gardener of this section talked to me about her thinking around plant positions – trying to organise plants in ‘bouquets’ grouped in threes of either tall, medium or small. These triangles could be repeated at points along the border but with their orders changed. The aim was to create a sort of gradually increasing heights – from tall to medium to small and then back up again, whilst also considering colour gradients. She explained that the lower areas would allow you to see behind to the areas of lawn in front of the house, which have underplanted trees. Previously they had been organised as high at the back at smaller at the front, but, as she said, it seemed a shame to obstruct the view to this. The varying heights of the planting enabled framed windows to this view. I was interested to learn that, as a rule, they don’t use perennials – tending to change up the planting each season with new annuals.



Helping with the gathering of plants was fun. The propagation facilities are huge and it did feel a bit like going to a plant centre. We went with the truck and loaded up a trailer of the necessary plants, trays of annuals grown from seed and some larger perennials. All of the plants were ready for plant out first thing the following day, before visitors arrived. It is interesting navigating the demands of the job with the number of visitors.

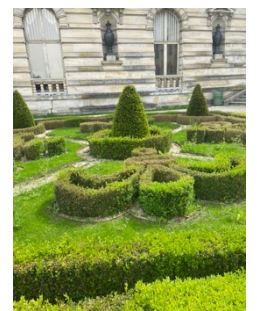


The East side of the garden is shadier, and this is where the ‘paint box’ beds are (above bed 23 on the map – the smaller rectangles running vertically) which needed replacing. Beds of fours were in their specific colours. The garden had a lot of Himalayan balsam (*Impatiens grandulifera*) which, although in high quantity, was quite easy and satisfying to remove. Bed 42 had quite a lot, and one of the other students and I spent time working through this.

One of the days we had a group visit to the Chateau de Chantilly. Designed by André Le Notre in the second half of the 17th century, before he designed Versailles, it includes formal parterres, expansive water features, and meticulously sculpted lawns, showcasing the classical French style of gardening. The Grand Canal and the Water Garden, with their geometric precision, reflect the grandeur and symmetry typical of his work. There was a plant festival there which was fascinating with stalls of specific plant varieties alongside sellers of tools or plant related gifts all with the beautiful backdrop of the castle.

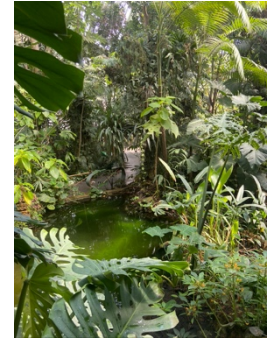


The castle was so impressive and I enjoyed exploring the galleries within the building, as well as the grounds, by no means managing to see all 285 acres! I particularly liked the ponds, fountains and statues. The mirrors of water with waterlilies were reminiscent of Giverny but the overall formality was completely different. There wasn’t as much *Buxus sempervirens* as I had expected to see, it was apparent theirs like in the UK was also struggling.

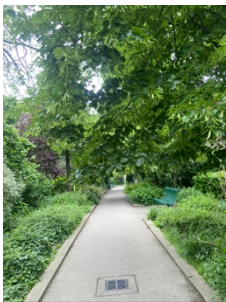


Weekend in Paris

With more gardens in Paris to visit, I returned for the weekend. The formality of the Place de Vosges and the Jardin des Tuileries contrasted with the soft impressionistic style of Giverny. As I had felt with the Jardin du Luxembourg, it was clear that the space was really used for people's enjoyment. Again, there were chairs which people could move, and used to sit where they preferred. The Jardin des Plantes was definitely the horticultural highlight of the weekend. Free to enter it, but with ticketed entry to the glasshouse, there was so much to see. There were beds organised by family, a rose garden, a beautiful art deco entranced glasshouse with a waterfall, an alpine garden and formal gardens. The glasshouse is divided into sections, each housing plants from distinct biomes: the Great Tropical Greenhouse with lush vegetation, towering palms, ponds with fish and a humid, warm environment mimicking tropical rainforests. There is also a Mexican and Australian Greenhouse containing Arid and semi-arid plants and the New Caledonian Greenhouse which unfortunately was closed for renovation.



With not a huge amount of time, I couldn't spend as long as I would have liked there, but I certainly got a feel for the space, and would love to return.



I particularly wanted to visit the Coulée verte in the 12th arrondissement. Above an obsolete railway, the path follows a 4.7km railway line, 10 metres above the streets below. It was created in 1988, the world's first elevated park and inspired the New York Highline. It is planted with trees, shrubs, planters and along the way are benches to sit and admire views over the streets, murals and water features. I did wonder how they got all the plants up there, and how they disposed of the green waste... An incredible feat! I loved being above all the traffic of the city, seeing the streets and architecture from a different perspective and it really felt like an urban oasis.

Reflections

This trip enabled me to work in an incredible garden of world-wide renown, learn different horticultural practices, visit gardens, and improve my French. The gardeners and team in Giverny were so welcoming to me, and generous with their knowledge. Many of them had started working in the garden when they were in their early twenties, and were now in their fifties, so they had really extensive wisdom to share. Meeting other horticulturists from around the world has been such a valuable part of this trip, and perhaps what I enjoyed the most. Creating networks between countries, gardens, and people is such an enriching experience and I am very grateful to the Merlin Trust for helping enable this to happen.

Breakdown of costs

Eurostar - £132

Travel within France (trains between Giverny and Paris) £72

Accommodation in Paris - £267

Food whilst there - £316

Entry to gardens - £27.75

Total £814.75

Funding

Merlin Trust - £400

Munn Volunteer Programme - £126.64

Personal contribution - £288.11