



The Provençal garden of the newly built house in St Paul-en-Forêt, Var



Using gravel as a mulch also works to unify different areas of the garden

A way with plants

Jackie Herald talks to Provence-based designer James Basson, winner of the Silver-Gilt Flora award at last year's Chelsea Flower Show, about his garden design philosophy

Since showing his garden at Chelsea Flower Show last year, English garden designer James Basson has become synonymous with contemporary French landscapes of the Mediterranean.

Living in Provence, where he established his design practice 13 years ago, most of the gardens he designs enjoy wonderful views of the sea and, due to the nature of planning permission in the area, are usually large plots of up to 20,000m².

The size of these projects has led Basson to create beautiful expanses of planting which are low-maintenance and take advantage of the landscape, climate and – of course – those spectacular views.

One of the secrets behind Basson's success is a 'formula' he has developed for the planting aspects of the design. His signature swathes of colour and texture are a key feature of these large garden designs, but if you have a smaller plot you could easily adapt the idea for your own space. This doesn't mean that any garden using this 'formula' looks identikit: far from it.

Generally, he incorporates 200-300 varieties of plant in any one scheme, which sounds complicated but actually does not depend on experienced gardeners to realise it.

This is based on the kind of ecological approach that James Hitchmough and Nigel Dunnett used for the meadows and borders at London's Olympic Park. Hitchmough and Dunnett assert that if you want a natural-looking garden, the last thing to do is get an experienced gardener to plant it as they would take great pains to seek perfection in the placement of individual plants and plugs.

As well as having this huge variety, each of his designs include bands of different planting

combinations which are spaced at 60, 40, 30 or 20cm intervals. No more than three plants of one species or variety are planted together.

In an area where you want a swathe of predominantly one species, the mix might work something like this: 50% *Cistus* (part of the Provençal wildscape), 10% lavender, 30% grasses and 10% bulbs.

"We then throw this across the planting zone," says James, his use of language deliberately challenging the conventional

Covering the whole area in gravel works well to unify the whole garden. This serves as a mulch to attenuate heavy rainfall and in the dry months reduces evaporation

expectation of gardeners and designers who map out each plant's centre to perfection.

He will usually buy *godets* (9cm pots) of herbaceous perennials and grasses, as these are best value and have a high success rate in terms of acclimatising and getting established.

What works really well to unify the whole garden is to cover the whole area in gravel, which serves as a mulch to attenuate heavy rainfall, and in the dry months reduces evaporation. During the first season the plants will grow up through the gravel and become visually dominant.

GROUND CONTROL

One example of this is the garden of a newly built property in St Paul-en-Forêt in Var.

"We laid a blanket of what we do across the whole garden," explains James. The owners regard their new garden as a dream come true and have permanently moved to their French home. The owner is also a fanatical gardener and understands James's approach to planting, working with the matrix he set up.

"We put in 80% of what the ground can take, leaving her to add 20%," James says.

"She has really kept the feel, and is intellectually involved in the whole project, having taken on board the natural drift effect of the planting."

Covering the whole garden with gravel means that they can go out whenever they feel like gardening and don't get muddy even in the rain. It also means that pulling up weeds and unwanted seedlings is much easier.

LANDSCAPING NEW-BUILDS

Generally, new-builds are put into landscapes where no one has trodden (or gardened) before, and James "tries to pull the land back in" so that the garden sits comfortably within the bigger picture.

Large-scale developers ensure the build comes in on budget and while buyers probably get good value for their money, the landscaping has more often than not been left out of the overall plan. Sadly, it's a case of buy at a reasonable price and pay for putting things right after moving in.

Often contractors leave major drainage issues in their wake, the fall of slopes being all over the place, and subsoil spread around the site. When it rains in Provence, it rains hard



LES HERBES DE PROVENCE

A bundle of herbs native to the area: they're easy to grow, delicious in stews and look beautiful in the garden

rosemary - *le romarin*

savory - *la sarriette*

thyme - *le thym*

oregano - *l'origan (m)*

marjoram - *la marjolaine*

basil - *le basilic*

and after the dry summer spell the runoff is immense. This is a common issue that gardeners in this region have to address in their landscaping solutions. The answer is to stabilise the land with plants.

If there's a pool, James aims to tie it in with both house and garden. If you want to meet health and safety standards in your garden, there are two main options. You can either cover the pool – though this means having the eyesore of a huge sheet of plastic when the pool's not in use – or put 1,100mm-high fencing around the pool area, fitting it as discreetly as possible. Remember that when you're swimming you are submerged in the garden, with a fresh perspective on your surroundings, looking up and out at the view.

Arbutus is often planted small for clusters of

texture. Another Provençal native is the blackthorn which is great for encouraging wildlife and acting as a windbreak for those times when the *Mistral* wind comes. For structural planting, to create focal points and screening from the wind or sun, native trees such as mulberry and olive also work well.

As far as possible James uses local materials. He rarely uses timber in his schemes, but on the few occasions when he does, he specifies larch (*le mélèze*) which is locally grown, and is naturally resistant to the weather.

Natural stone is always locally sourced and can be used in either gravel or natural forms for paths, mulch and traditional French drystone walling. For a contemporary look,

cut stone can be a successful alternative although this may need to be sourced from further afield, thus lessening its green credentials.

"Sadly, I don't always convince customers to my way of thinking," remarks James. In environmental terms he's right to try and draw clients away from the English desire for a mown lawn with herbaceous borders and some specimen shrubs and trees.

People often have the idea that a holiday home must have lots of flashy flowers, big *Agapanthus* plants and a large pool and terrace. In actual fact, these bright colours are not natural in the subdued vegetation of high summer in southern France. ▶

ROOTED IN HISTORY

Contrasting with the new-builds of Provence is this old property in Saint-Victor-des-Oules. The architecture feels very strong as the size of the façade of the building almost equals the size of the garden itself. The owners use the place for their summer holidays to soak up the sunshine near Avignon surrounded by lovely rolling hills.

"The original garden must have been delightful," says James, "but it had completely crumbled away. In order to do the necessary renovation work on the property, the building contractors had to unravel the history that had taken root, taking care not to damage the ancient mulberry trees

located close to the house."

Those trees had been part of the site's history, as they fed the silkworms that were reared and tended in the top loft.

James set about capturing something of the powerful history of the place within the constraints of the new garden – which needed to include a pool and a lawn. He came up with a zig-zag of walls that have radically changed the sense of movement in the garden, and broken up the previous arrangement of a driveway taking you straight to the kitchen door. The planting is very diverse and a dripper pipe system was installed as a temporary measure to establish the plants.





James Basson's 'Dulce et Decorum Est' garden won gold for France at the Gardening World Cup, Nagasaki

SHOW-STOPPER

I asked James how he feels about representing France and French garden design at international shows. He and his family are very much part of an international community in their village near Grasse and the villagers are, rather touchingly, extremely proud of his achievements last year – first at Chelsea Flower Show, and then at the World Gardening Championships in Japan.

“It all happened by accident really,” James explains. “The planting approach at Chelsea 2012 took inspiration from the Vallon Perdu near Nice and there were Japanese representatives looking for someone to showcase French garden design.” They loved the authenticity of his garden and when James turned up in Nagasaki to plan his competition garden they were amazed to discover his English roots, especially as his planting is now more aggressively Mediterranean than ever.

James's theme for this year's Chelsea Flower Show is 'After the Fire'. The planting includes species that have adapted to the local climate such as *Acacia dealbata* (mimosa) which is now prolific in areas that are extremely flammable. *Cistus* and lavender, naturally oil-filled, are potentially extremely combustible too. Terracotta is a key element of the structure, giving an added texture to the design, and James is currently working with the Poterie du Chêne Vert in Languedoc, who come up with new glazes and other effects.

James enjoys this collaborative process, also working with Jean Philippe Weimar who creates sculptures of molten glass that “feel like they have just come out of the fire”. ■

Jackie Herald is a landscape and interior designer, whose practice The Extra Room is based in London. She will be a consultant on planting design for Le Chêne Vert's stand at Chelsea Flower Show on 22-25 May 2013
Tel: 07714 234808

www.scapedesign.com
www.poteriedanduze.com



CONTEMPORARY CHARM

This garden near Nice in the medieval village of Tourettes-sur-Loup was designed by James Basson's design company who have ensured that the garden sits comfortably in the Alpes-Maritimes landscape.

The property is perched on top of a hill, and while the views are fantastic, the foreground is quite cluttered. One real challenge of the project was making the house feel part of the surrounding landscape as the ground is extremely steep.

“To prevent the eye from dipping down and getting distracted, we used olive trees as an *allée* (pictured above) for a raised hedge effect,” James explains. “Now, when you're in the main living spaces of the house, you get the feeling there's nothing between you and the sea, other than the perched village of Tourettes-sur-Loup.

The clients, a London couple who spend about three months a year in Provence, wanted the garden to look contemporary,

without losing its wild character. The planting list was pared down and bands of plants were repeated across the garden: mostly shrubby evergreen material including atriplex, cistus, coronilla, lavender, myrtle, perovskia, rosemary, teucrium and thyme. For each species a selection of five varieties was chosen to spread out the flowering times and enhance the visual interest.

The design also incorporated a grove of olive trees which fit in beautifully and look agricultural, referring back to the history of the site. Cypress trees add a strong vertical element; rather than use them in a formal manner, James says the decision was made to “cast them down the garden in drifts”.

“Often in a wild landscape you'll find that cypresses follow a stream or trace water within the ground,” he says. “There's a phenomenal amount of water that runs through this garden and we found a big well about eight metres deep – we've used the cypress trees to signify that”.

