



The Hardy Plant Society

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HPS Abroad The View from Monet's Bedroom *Observations of First-time HPS Travelers*

by Karl Stark

WE COULD HAVE MADE OUR OWN POST CARDS from the Hardy Plant Society's trip to France in September.

Tops would be the view from Claude Monet's bedroom in **Giverny**, the flower beds bursting with zinnias, dahlias, and nasturtium. Another card would cover the **Jardin Georges Delaselle** on Île-de-Batz, a short ferry ride off the Brittany coast, where the weather is so temperate that palm trees prosper and most of the plants are from the southern hemisphere. And then there's the garden with the most un-French name **Le Shamrock**, with a world-class collection of just one genus: *Hydrangea*.

Also in our memories were the gardeners themselves, an obsessive lot of compost lovers, who drew forth so much from the fecund French soil. One had been the spokesperson for a French prime minister, while another cited a French movie star as a client and had a stunning habit of trucking in large trees.

This list is just a soupçon of the eight-day trip that 20 of us took through 15 gardens in Normandy and Brittany. The romp by bus was a rolling cavalcade of colors, an assault on the senses that left even veteran gardeners gaping at the panache of their French compatriots.

It was also extremely well organized. Susan Worner, the British tour owner, planned and led this expedition. She chose gardens that were all different and compelling, even some not open to the public, along with restaurants that were memorable. We spent four nights each in two hotels, allowing us to pack less often and relax more deeply.

We got to know our hosts, especially at the Clos Masure Hôtel where Patrick

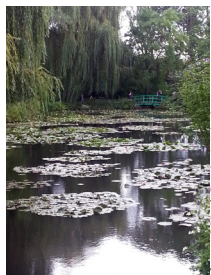


The view from Monet's bedroom

photo ©Karl Stark & Linda Mareucci

and Jean François looked after us with élan, altering food to individual taste and providing estimable fermented beverages. And we wouldn't have had as much fun without our driver Guillaume, who handled our stick-shift bus with surgical precision.

This was our first trip with HPS and the first time we had traveled with a tour group. While not a gardener (I am allergic to dust and pollen), I found much to enjoy: the meals, the company of smart and friendly folks, the often quirky garden owners and their pianos. My wife Linda, an avid gardener, was stoked.



Giverny water lilies

photo ©Karl Stark & Linda Mareucci

Monet's garden, just outside Paris, was the first stop, and half of it is a watery wonder. Set in a picturesque country town, the two-story house is stocked with paintings and drawings, many with a Japanese tinge that influenced the great man's art. The garden next to the house provides a living panorama of Impressionism. We trooped through a tunnel, funded by the Annenberg Foundation, and walked under the road to view the pond with hundreds of water lilies and the green bridge, all familiar from his paintings.

Ooh là là! is all we could muster at **Le Jardin Plume**, a moist oasis where
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hedges were cut like waves and swaths of tall grasses give the garden its name. The owners, Sylvie and Patrick Quibel, began with formal box hedges that hinted of England's Sissinghurst and soon branched out into the freewheeling chaos of the prairie. In between were rooms that celebrated each season.

Some gardeners projected a sense of noblesse oblige. The late Norwegian-born Princess Margareta Sturdza, who met her Romanian husband while studying literature at Oxford, was famous for wielding a stick and creating the massive **Le Jardin du Vasterival**, with more than 10,000 plants. Self-taught, she developed theories about the importance of pruning trees to create more vistas and let in light to the plants below.

The most famous nobleman on this trip was the late Prince Peter Wolkonsky, whose ancestor provided the basis for a character in *War and Peace*. The prince emigrated to France from St. Petersburg soon after the Russian Revolution in 1917. His **Les Jardins de Kerdalo** has a Jurassic Park-like sweep, with huge gunneras and a grotto, not to mention a killer formal garden behind the house, a stand of monkey trees, and even a cool cork tree up the hill. While the inspirations range from

Italian to Chinese to a tropical jungle, the scale is epic Russian.

Overseeing his garden now falls to his daughter Isabelle and her husband Timothy Vaughan, an internationally known landscape designer. She hosted us to a cold salmon lunch and later spirited us away to her personal garden which is not open to the public. It proved to be formal and intimate and full of curvaceous shrubs that she laughingly called "butt cheeks."

Kerdalo's influence was also strong at **Manoir du Pelinec**, a late 17th-century manse and seven-acre garden on the Pelinec estuary. Owner Gérard Jean credits the Russian for inspiring him to buy the property 20 years ago, after it sat empty for 50 years. Now it is full of microclimates and unusual plants, and is overseen by a mind that likes to surprise and shock.

Other gardeners, while lacking titles, were aristocratic. Descended from a famous banking family, Robert Mallet created **Le Shamrock**, declared in 1999 the most important hydrangea collection in the world, according to the Specialized Plant Collection Institute. His 1,400 plants on five acres are a monument

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photo © Karl Stark & Linda Mareucci

"Cheeks" at Crech ar Pape, garden of Isabelle and Timothy Vaughan

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to obsession. His wife Corinne wrote the definitive book *Hydrangeas*, in case you missed the focus.

Mallet's two sisters live nearby in **Bois des Moutiers**, a garden and house built by their father. The 30-acre estate was occupied by the Nazis who took all the door handles. Robert's sister Claire told us how she and the family had to personally repair the estate after the war. "We are not the Rothschilds," she pointed out. The house and grounds, full of colorful exotic rooms, were designed by architect Edwin Lutyens and garden designer Gertrude Jekyll.

While not quite an aristocrat, Nathalie Romatet does live in the 17th-century **Château de Miromesnil**, inherited from her grandmother who bought it in the 1930s. Here we found a gorgeous potager garden, surrounded by a brick wall with apple and pear trees and rows of vegetables and flowers. Guy de Maupassant, the French short story writer, was born here in 1857.

Nathalie is making the château work as a bed and breakfast. Her children practiced their English while serving us lunch with fresh ingredients from the garden.

More gardens deserve mention. Landscape architect Alexandre Thomas created

a movie set-like setting for **Les Jardins Agapanthe**. These two gardens are dramatic, with more than 500 boxed balls to keep clipped. Thomas says he brought in many of the trees by truck, which stunned us given the cost, and he also thinks big with antiques and garden ornaments that are equally grand. Everything is covered by a layer of light brown river sand which Thomas calls crucial to his vision.

La Brunvillere, just ten years in the making, won the admiration of British garden designer Penelope Hobhouse. Owner Jean-Jacques Liegeois was a photographer for Chanel and others while Madame Liegeois served as press secretary for Jacques Chirac, the former French president. They followed a master plan, developing allées with rustic touches and a dovecote with shell-shaped shingles made of metal.

Finally, at **Le Grand Launay**, owner Jean Schalit has been working three acres since 1973. In a nod toward a famous story,



photo © Jim Bobb

Clipped boxwoods in the apple orchard at Le Grand Launay

he has clipped boxwoods cut like serpents and trained them to climb the apple trees. Jean is keen on making the garden a haven for art installations, inviting artists to spray-paint a large oak tree with lime or build a series of serpentine wood sculptures.

The night sky is so dark that his son Emanuel has installed an observatory on the property. So from his laptop in New York City, he can watch the stars in Brittany.

Here's wishing we could all do that.



Karl Stark is the business news editor for the Philadelphia Inquirer. **Linda Marcucci** is a recently retired high school counselor from Springfield Township High School in Montgomery County. Karl and Linda live and garden in Elkins Park.

Ed Note: For a full-color version of this article, go to the HPS/MAG website, www.hardyplant.org.