

French fancy

A century ago, the new owner of Château de Villandry began to restore his gardens to match the Renaissance splendour of his home. Kirsty Fergusson marvels at the breathtaking results. Photographs Claire Takacs



The 16th-century chateau was earmarked for demolition when Joachim Carvallo bought the estate in 1906. He designed the formal gardens to harmonise with the architecture of the newly restored building.

MICHELLE GARRETT/THE GARDEN COLLECTION

IN BRIEF

- **WHAT:** Renaissance-style gardens, including a highly ornamental kitchen garden (potager), created 1906-1920.
- **WHERE:** Touraine, central France.
- **SIZE:** Formal gardens occupy six hectares (15 acres), of which the potager comprises one hectare.
- **POINTS OF INTEREST:** Terraced, formal layout makes ingenious use of a sloping site. A spring feeds an ornamental pond, canal and fountains.



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Herbaceous plants in the potager are renewed completely in March and June. By the end of the season, 250,000 have been used. Standard roses and clipped fruit trees are a permanent presence. **BELOW LEFT:** Hornbeam hedges, pergolas and more than 1,100 pleached limes provide a bold framework.

Villandry is one of the few gardens in the world that has achieved iconic status. Like Sissinghurst or Monet’s garden at Giverny, it is one of those gardens that everybody feels they know, whether they have been there or not. Villandry is the perfect potager, in which utility meets decoration in a tightly controlled framework of geometric greenery. The gardens here have inspired and set the standard for countless potagers of all sizes throughout the world.

Visiting a garden like this is always a revelation. Your expectations are immediately confronted by the actual reality of the place. It is as close as you can come to stepping through a picture frame and finding yourself in the imagined world of a painting.

It’s different, of course, for the present owner of Villandry, Henri Carvallo. He grew up here as a boy and the gardens have been ever-present in his life. Leaning on a stone parapet overlooking the gardens beside the chateau, he surveys the six hectares (15 acres) of formal gardens laid out by his great-grandfather, an eminent Spanish physicist, Dr Joachim Carvallo, almost a century ago. “I find the harmony between the design of the gardens and the architecture of the chateau the key ingredient here,” he says. “That is the magic of Villandry.”

Ever mindful of the risk that a great garden can become a victim of its own success, he adds: “350,000 visitors a year is fantastic, but it’s very important to me that everyone feels the harmony of the place and makes an intimate, personal connection with the garden. I live here with my family and I think that makes all the difference. There is something so soulless about a garden otherwise.”

And that really is the magic of Villandry: it’s big, exquisitely formal and maintained to the ultimate degree of trim weedlessness, but its owner loves it and lives in it and consequently the garden has a sense of purpose and dynamism – without appearing hectically busy. It is as smart as a Paris Left Bank shop window without being manicured into frozen perfection.

A garden to suit the chateau

Visitors can walk straight into Villandry’s celebrated potager without preamble, but it’s a good idea to follow the route that Henri suggests and climb up to the ramparts via a stone staircase within the north wing. It’s an excellent vantage point from which to appreciate the garden’s intricate parterres laid out far below. “Renaissance gardens were designed to be seen from the upper storeys,” explains Henri, “so I always encourage people to climb up here – or even higher, to the belvedere on the hillside, from where you get a much better idea of what Joachim intended.”

When Joachim bought Villandry at the beginning of the 20th century, the derelict chateau was surrounded by the remains of a 19th-century, English-style park. “Most unusually for his time, he decided to create a French Renaissance-style garden that would be in keeping with the architecture of the chateau. What you see now is almost exactly the garden he created.”



HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES



potted history

Villandry was built by Jean le Breton in the early 16th century on the site of a medieval fortress. Le Breton was ambassador to Rome for François I and spent a lot of his time in Italy visiting gardens. Sadly, his original plans for the gardens at Villandry are lost.

The chateau passed to the Marquis de Castellane in 1754 who added the classical outbuildings. It was seized during the revolution, and

in the early 19th century the classical gardens were destroyed and replaced with an English-style park. The chateau went into decline and was due for demolition by the time Joachim Carvallo bought it in 1906. He restored the building, removing some of the excrescences which spoiled its original design (compare the picture left with the view above). The property has remained in the Carvallo family’s hands ever since.



The intricate patterns of the gardens are best appreciated from the upper storeys of the Château. The Potager covers the lower area of the garden, beyond the Jardin d'amour.

“The prospect is breathtakingly complex ... the miles of interlacing box hedging almost too much to absorb”



These box parterres are clipped into a variety of cross shapes. Closer to the house lies the Jardin d'Amour, whose quadrants are filled with symbols of love.

The prospect is breathtakingly complex: the green architecture of pleached hornbeam, clipped yew topiary and miles of interlacing box hedging is almost too much to absorb. There are three principal terraces, balustraded and tree-lined or enclosed in long pergolas, so that shady walks look down and over a succession of sunlit geometric theatres. Wide, sandy paths lead you by stone fountains, over canals and by bassins.

Villandry is very much a garden to visit in winter too, when the drama of each terrace is written in frosty austerity.

Colour and form

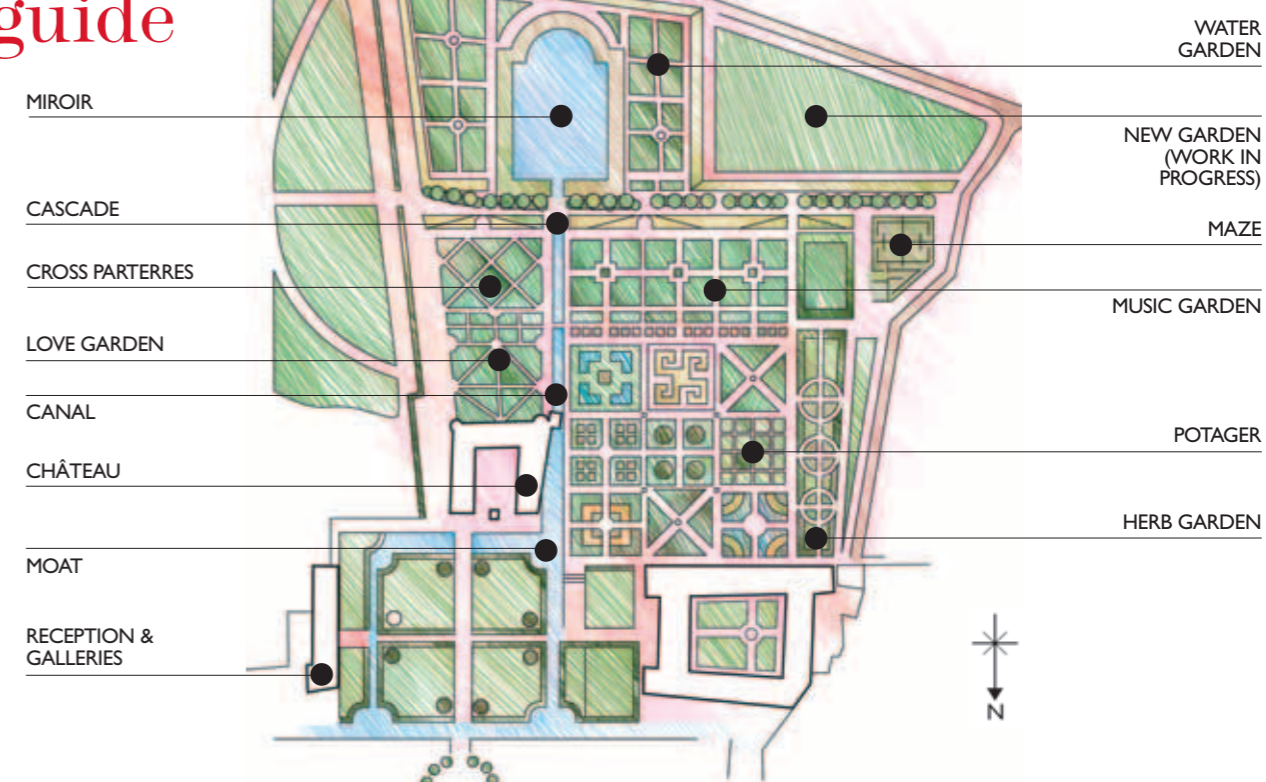
The vast potager, covering one hectare (2.5 acres), is held in an L-shaped embrace by a series of knot gardens, representing love and music. Untangling the intricate symbolism requires guidance today, but the Renaissance courtier would have had no difficulty identifying the horticultural and geometric representations of lyres and harps, or fickle, true, passionate and tender love pivoting around the Maltese cross and the French fleur-de-lis.

Below this symbolic preface, and divided from the upper world by a glassy canal, the potager occupies the lowest of the terraces. Its nine box-framed squares, each sub-divided into smaller geometric shapes, present a fantastically colourful chequerboard, from spring until late autumn. This is the apotheosis of that uniquely French approach to precision



Parterre patterns in the Music Garden represent musical motifs and stylised instruments. ABOVE: Pleached limes fringe the starkly simple Miroir.

garden guide



ILLUSTRATED BY SCOTT WOTHERSPOON



Stone steps lead from the Potager to the Music Garden, flanked by a pergola shaded with vines. **BELOW:** A cascade in the Canal elegantly exploits the sloping site.

▷ vegetable gardening: millimetre-perfect rows of leeks and lettuces, cabbages and carrots, chard and chives, organised as much by colour as by the need for healthy crop rotation.

Twice a year, almost all the beds are dug up, fertilised and replanted with seasonal vegetables as well as spring and summer bedding plants. Each year a new planting plan is devised – a mind-boggling, statistically awesome tour de force, implemented by just nine full-time gardeners, under the direction of Henri himself with serene efficiency and minimum disruption. A quarter of a million plants come and go each year, half of which are raised in Villandry's own nursery. These relatively ephemeral visitors flourish against a permanent framework of trellis-grown roses and slender fruit trees.

During the First World War, the tons of vegetables the gardens yielded were used to supply the military hospitals in the area. Now too, as much of the harvest as possible is put to good use, given away to visitors or, if inedible, fed to the gigantic compost heaps that nourish the gardens.

No two days are ever the same at Villandry. "I love looking out of my window and observing the dynamic changes in colour and texture as the seasons progress," says Henri, "and two hours before sunset the light is quite wonderful." That's the time to step through the frame and become part of the living icon. □



Further information

Château de Villandry, 37510 Villandry, near Tours, Centre region, France. Tel +33 (0)2 47 50 02 09, www.chateauvillandry.com

- Open daily, 9-5 (and until 6.30 or 7.30 in summer). Admission (gardens only) costs €5.5 for adults and €3.5 for children aged 8-18.
- The gardens are always especially busy during school holidays and public holidays so it may be worth avoiding these dates.

BBC The gardens at Château de Villandry appear in *Around the World in 80 Gardens*, starting soon on BBC2. See *Radio Times* for transmission dates.



How to get there

If driving from Paris, leave the A10 at exit 24 (Joué-lès-Tours). Take the A85 towards Saumur, leaving at exit 8, signposted Villandry. In July and August shuttle buses run daily from the nearest train station, St Pierre des Corps (Tours).



CHÂTEAU DE BOSMELET
In the Rainbow Potager veg, flowers and fruit are planted in colour themes over two acres. 76720 Auffay, Normandy. Open from June, times vary. Tel +33 (0)2 35 32 81 07, www.chateau-de-bosmelet.fr



△ **SAINT-JEAN DE BEAUREGARD**
Owned by the same family since 1628, this walled garden contains many heritage vegetables. 91940 Saint-Jean de Beauregard, near Paris. Open daily from 15 March. Tel +33 (0)1 60 12 00 01, www.domsaintjeanbeauregard.com



be inspired

Five pretty and productive potagers to visit in France, home of the ornamental vegetable garden. Photographs Le Scanff-Mayer



CHÂTEAU DE CORMATIN
Gardens restored since 1981 include a potager in which cardoons, herbs and English roses crowd informal, willow-edged beds. 1460 Cormatin, Burgundy. Open daily from 1 April to mid-Nov. Tel +33 (0)3 85 50 16 55, www.chateaucormatin.com

CHÂTEAU DE MIROMESNIL ▷
Pretty potager: 76550 Tourville-sur-Arques, Normandy. Open afternoons from 1 April. Tel +33 (0)2 35 85 02 80, www.chateau-miromesnil.com



△ **LE POTAGER DU ROI, VERSAILLES**
Extraordinary eight-hectare plot, created 1678-1683, includes 5,000 fruit trees. ENSP 10, rue du Maréchal Joffre, 78000 Versailles. Open Tue-Fri until end Mar; Tue-Sun from April. www.potager-du-roi.fr