

## **Blisters, Heat Stroke and Pick-Axes**

Trying to grow a temperate garden in a Mediterranean climate? Well - you're headed for heartache. Here we give invaluable tips on how to succeed in your Languedoc garden.

At Le Domaine aux Quat'Saisons gardening is one of our many passions; here we describe how we planned and developed the Domaine's substantial garden in the Languedoc, taking it from a barren field to a colourful oasis in just 2 years. Guests staying at Le Domaine can now enjoy the magical garden, vineyard and swimming pool complex.

### **How did we come to do this?**

In the spring of 2004 we left our jobs in the city of London in the United Kingdom and moved to France, simple as that!. We had already bought Le Domaine aux Quat'Saisons, an elegant manor house near Carcassonne.

Amongst other desirable features the house was blessed with a 2 acre garden and vineyard; but there was one big problem; there was nothing attractive in the garden whatsoever, just stumpy old vines and worn out fruit trees. As we planned to open the property as luxury chambre d'hotels accommodation for holiday makers, we set about the task of planning a suitable garden.

Little did we know what we had let ourselves in for!

### **Our first Gardening Thoughts - Despair!**

It was now July 2004 and the Languedoc sun burnt brightly in the sky.

Gardening readers of this article may be familiar with this:

- The soil, hard baked clay, was like concrete - we could not even pierce the crust with a spade.
- The few plants we brought with us from the UK all died in one week after exposure to the sun.
- as we cut down weeds they sprang back up like Triffids.
- The vines and old fruit trees that spread across the garden area were impossible to remove by hand; tough like steel.
- The area was so huge that even after a walk in the garden at midday we needed to rest in the shade and drink copiously.

At this point we longed for our corner of an English Garden, with its soft light, damp earth and profusion of flowers.

### **Get Local Help - they have seen this before**

In despair we turned to Gill Pound at la Petite Pepinerie in Caunes-Minervois. What should we do? We realised we had found a font of local knowledge - with Gill's help we began to put a grand overall design for the garden in place. An avenue of Mimosa trees, large planted beds near the house, tropical planting near the pool, and a complete re-planting of several wildly overgrown banks, the creation of several new ones, the installation of a pond and fountain, monument lighting for the 200 year old cedars trees that are at the centre of the garden, the list goes on and on.

We were full of enthusiasm for the ambitious plan and we embarked open it with enormous energy and dedication. We hired in extra help, relatives came over to assist and we identified lists of plants that could survive the harsh summer, drought and winter frost. We attacked the ground with mechanical diggers and pick-axes, we toiled for many months and we watered. Over 1,500 plants, shrubs and trees went in in the first year alone and over 1,000 spring bulbs.

### **Our First Taste of the Magic to Come**

In the spring of the following year we had our first taste of success; hundreds of Alliums bloomed and enchanted us with their gorgeous flowers.

We were hooked and we gardened on, developing the plan with each new season and learning from failures (yes, like all gardeners we had our fair share) and successes. Plants grow fast in the Languedoc; within 2 years we had brought about enormous change and we can now stand back and be truly proud of our achievements. Visitors staying at Le Domaine can now enjoy the unique pleasure of its 2 acre garden, vineyard and pool complex.

From where we are nearly 3 years on, we have learnt an awful lot more about what to do; so here are our top 15 tips as well as our top Languedoc plants.

### **Our top 15 tips for Success**

- Forget all you knew about what plants work in the UK, they won't work in the Languedoc.
- Lawns are almost impossible in the Languedoc, just mow the weeds and couch grass you have regularly.
- Only plant what grows successfully in other gardens in the region - do not be tempted to try fancy hybrids or sub-species as they are all less resilient than their parents.

- Only plant in the autumn, after the first rains. This gives the plants a chance to establish before the heat of next summer. It will save you a lot of dead plants!
- Expect some plantings to die. The different soils and microclimates across the Languedoc mean that what does well in one place may not do so well elsewhere. Re-plant or replace failures the following autumn.
- Expect to water a lot in the first summer. Use well water if you have it, otherwise tap. Tap is expensive but if you don't do it the plants will die.
- Water specimen plants with automatic irrigation thereafter. If you don't they will stay stunted and small.
- Use mulch wherever you can, anything you can get your hands on (leaves, garden refuse, gravel, bark, etc. - but not pine needles as they are a substantial fire hazard.)
- Give up on window boxes, small pots and especially hanging baskets unless you plan to spend time every day watering in the summer, without fail.
- Wrap tender specimens in fleece in mid December to protect from frost.
- Hire in diggers and rotavators to break up the soil and uproot unwanted trees and shrubs in large areas. It will break your back manually.
- Use glyphosate weed killer; weeding by hand will be an endless task except in small areas.
- Stake all trees to protect from winter winds.
- Forget nearly all annuals, they will die (see our list for some of those that will make it.)
- Find or create a shaded, sheltered area for al-fresco eating, one of the greatest pleasures of Languedoc living.

## Top Languedoc Toughies

Believe us you need the toughest plants; do not be tempted to think you can woo tender plants in your garden, you cannot!

<p><b>Shrubs and Perennials</b></p> <p>Viburnum tinus Pyracantha (Firethorn) Nerium olenader (Oleander) Teucrium species Rosmarinus (Rosemary) Lavendar Salvia species Gaillardia Gaura lindheimeri Solanum rantonettii Callistemon (Bottle brush) Perovskia atripicifolia (Russian sage) Euphorbia char. wulfenii Cotoneaster horizontalis Melianthus major Kniphofia uvaria (Red hot pokers) Iris species Cannas Yucca Agave americana Phormiums (New Zealand Flax)</p> <p><b>Grasses</b></p> <p>Miscanthus species and hybrids Cortaderia selloana (Pampas grass) Pennisetum orientale and P. villosum and cultivars</p>	<p><b>Annuals</b></p> <p>Cosmos Zinnias Escholzia californica</p> <p><b>Bulbs</b></p> <p>Allium species Agapanthus Species tulips Lillium species (Lillies)</p> <p><b>Trees</b></p> <p>Mimosa dealbata Arbutus unedo (Strawberry Tree) Tamarisk Eucalyptus gunnei (Gum Tree) Palms (Trachycarpus fortunei, Washingtonia robusta, Bhutia capitata)</p>
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We would be pleased to share our wonderful, magical garden with you. For more information contact:

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