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FEBRUARY 15, 2012

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Château du Lude, Pays de la Loire, France

Kirsty Fergusson explores the reinvigorated gardens of a medieval fortress, which have become a beacon of horticultural excellence

Photographs by Allan Pollok-Morris

IN the garden revolution that has been sweeping across France in the past two or three decades, a growing and distinguished network of designers, plantspeople, garden owners and nurserymen have established—or, perhaps, re-established—France on the horticultural map. At Château du Lude, another voice has quietly added itself to the chorus.

'In 1980, when I first arrived at Le Lude as a young bride,' says Barbara de Nicolay, 'it was clear to me that Belgium, where I had grown up, had the upper hand where gardens were concerned. I'm not so sure that is the case now.' It's possible that her perception was influenced by her family home at Hex, one of Belgium's most important historic gardens (COUNTRY LIFE, October 12, 2011), and by her parents—especially her mother, Nanda d'Ursel—who were deeply committed to the introduction of new plants. After Hex, the gardens surrounding the Château du Lude, although idyllically framed by the tranquil Loire and overlooking fine, tree-studded meadows, must have come as something of a culture shock to Mme de Nicolay. 'Everything was geared to ➢

Château du Lude and its water meadows are beautifully framed by the Loire river

Above **When early-morning mist rolls off the river and adjacent meadows, elegant details, such as urns and the balustrade atop the 17th-century retaining wall, are thrown into sharp relief.** *Below* **Playing it straight: the garden is spread over Edouard André's three broad, 19th-century terraces, with their long, formal gravel walks**

the summer months, when the *château* put on a thrice weekly *son et lumière* show, complete with charging medieval knights—there were blazing displays of scarlet and yellow annuals, which show up well in artificial light. The garden, such as it was, suffered dreadfully,' she recalls.

She found refuge from the galloping and gaudiness in the walled potager, closed to the public, and presided over by M. Martinet, who had been head gardener at Lude since 1927. 'I'd never had the slightest inclination to get involved in the garden at Hex,' she smiles, 'but here I found myself fascinated by the mysterious private world of the kitchen garden, where traditional methods remained impervious to the changing world outside the high walls. It was a wonderful education.'

One of the first things she noticed was that the roses bloomed a month later than at Hex, where they were always out by June; the appositely named M. Martinet instructed her that he always pruned the roses in May, to delay flowering. This was because her husband's great-grandfather, who had been his first employer, never arrived at Lude until July, and the had habit remained unchanged down the generations. Mme de Nicolay started bringing back plants from her visits to Hex, which she raised in the potager, preparing for the time when she might start planting beyond its walls.

The garden is spread over three broad terraces, created in the late 1880s by the landscaper Edouard André. On the riverside below the *château*, sheltered by a 17th-century retaining wall some 220 yards long, André created a long, formal garden, complete with gravel walks, circular pools spouting jets of water and intricate parterres filled with seasonal flowers.

At the same time, the water meadows on the far side of the Loir were sensitively transformed into the pastoral idyll known in France as the *parc agricole*, believed to be by the Comte de Choulot, although not confirmed. Carefully managed grazing and the positioning of young cedars, oaks and

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poplars into picturesque clumps—with no small acknowlegement to the influence of Capability Brown—were once popular in the Angevin and landscape of the Touraine. Few, however, remain today. Economic necessity has wrought changes to the river-side garden, too, which now exists as a green composition of lawn and box topiary, but Mme de Nicolay is deeply thankful that the *parc agricole*, which has remained within the family domaine, has been allowed to mature in the spirit of de Choulot's vision.

In 1996, the *son et lumière* shows were brought to an end, and, a year later, the long, level terrace below the south facade of the *château* was redesigned by another of Mme de Nicolay's brothers, Augustin d'Ursel, to house a colourful collection of China, Tea and Hybrid Tea roses. Tucked behind trim walls of yew, many of the China roses that started life as cuttings at Hex have now grown to maturity. Roses were clearly again on Mme de Nicolay's mind as she and a group of garden-minded friends conceived the idea of an annual prize for French-language garden books, to be announced during the Festival for Gardeners. The Prix J-P Redoute, first awarded in 2000, was named after the great botanical illustrator of roses, who just happened also,' says Mme de Nicolay with the merest hint of a wink, to be Belgian.

From its medieval origins, when it stood as the first fortress barring the way to Norman invaders intent on gaining lands in the Loire valley, Château du Lude occupied a strategic position geographically. Now, it occupies a strategic position for gardeners, too, as one of the growing numbers of beacons bringing together those who were formerly scattered or isolated on the French gardening map.

Château du Lude, 72800 Le Lude, France (00 33 243 946 009; www.lelude.com)