


INTERNATIONAL

PHOTOS: Louisa Jones, Veronique Mure and Marianne Lavillonniere-Loison

FRENCH FANCY

Louisa Jones visits the “Garden of Migrations”, an ambitious project surrounding a museum and historic fortress in the south of France





The French Mediterranean seaport of Marseille has been a hive of commerce and migration since its founding as a Greek trading post around 600BC. In 1679, the 17th century military architect Vauban helped design a massive, angular fortress rising high between the town and the harbour, incorporating vestiges of a 12th century monastery. Its remnants, known as the Fort Saint-Jean, still cover some 15,000m². Closed for years to the public, isolated by a moat, this site was considered a “black hole” by the townspeople until, in 2013, it became part of a waterfront restoration financed partly by Europe.

A main focus was an ambitious museum of Mediterranean civilizations, the MuCem, designed next to the fortress by architect Rudy Ricciotti. Its black fretwork facades play with light and weather in a way that invites outdoor connections. Ricciotti imagined a dramatic pedestrian bridge linking museum and fortress as the first step of a “garden →

promenade” to be planned inside the ramparts. An intense competition was won by a southern Rhône valley firm, the APS Agency, notably Jean-Louis Knidel and Hubert Guichard. Their team studied at the prestigious Versailles school with such leading lights as Jacques Simon, Michel Corajoud, Alexandre Chemetoff and Gilles Clément, but also brought hands-on experience including training in nurseries in France and abroad. APS invited the participation of leading Mediterranean plantsman Olivier Filippi and of Véronique Mure, ethnobotanist and landscape consultant, creator of the living landscape museum at the Roman ruins at Pont du Gard. From this fertile collaboration emerged the winning theme: a “Garden of Migrations”.

Making connections

“We wanted these gardens to be as contextual as possible,” says Jean-Louis Knidel, and by adding a second footbridge offering direct access from the old town, their proposal also linked city, waterfront and sea. Outside and internal connections work harmoniously here on every scale, from the framing of dramatically windswept skies and views towards Africa to original furniture and even flower-pot ashtrays. Much of the fortress needed levelling to ensure gentle transitions, requiring new retaining walls. The hardscape makes full use of local craftsmen working in wood, corten steel and stone. The corporation of wall-makers of Provence worked with the hard stone of La Ciotat to bring out its many colours. Overall, the promenade offers intriguing but always comfortable changes of level and direction, a balance between multiple, crisscrossing perspectives and yet clear itinerary choices.

The plantings, covering roughly 6,500m², are Mediterranean, inspired by local landscapes. The first criteria were neither ornamental nor horticultural but ethnobotanical. By focusing on the Mediterranean heritage, the gardens extend the museum’s cultural mandate. Some parts illustrate plant migrations (the *Ailanthus* garden for example); others the site’s own history (the myrtle and wild salad gardens linked to a governor’s residence). Above all, whole ecosystems have been reproduced here in miniature: the “colline” or olive groves where people of Marseille still spend their weekends,

“BY FOCUSING ON THE MEDITERRANEAN HERITAGE, THE GARDENS EXTEND THE MUSEUM’S CULTURAL MANDATE”



PREVIOUS PAGE
Nepeta thrives at nose level on the Aromatic Promenade.
THIS PAGE Meadow plantings backed by tamarisk hedging. The Colline gravel garden with the Fanal Tower.

Photo: Marianne Majerus



VERONIQUE MURE

Few people know southern French ecosystems and flora better than botanist and agronomist Véronique Mure, specialist in landscape history and management and professor at the prestigious Ecole Nationale Supérieure du Paysage landscape school in Marseille. She is often a consultant for, and sometimes creator of, original public projects.
www.botanique-jardins-paysages.com



fig and pomegranate plantations, a threshing floor, a Mediterranean potager. At the same time, Filippi and Mure ensured that each planting fits its space, taking best advantage of its specific orientation, exposure, microclimate, etc. The results are varied, balanced and delightful. Thus the wind garden (mainly grasses) directly faces the northern Mistral. The potager is protected by a high rampart. Ramparts at shoulder height let you smell and touch. Gardener guides give bits to visitors to chew on. The food concession is managed by starred local chef Gérald Passédat. Classes will soon be offered on the culinary uses of plants in the garden.

Unique approach

The Saint Jean Fortress or MuCem gardens also offer a rare public example of the summer-dry cultivation methods perfected by Olivier Filippi. Almost all the plants are grown in gravel, 6-15cm deep, watered only in their first year of planting. Gardeners find the soil is often too rich and must remove organic matter such as fallen leaves. APS took pains to find gardeners who would understand the gardens' unique organisation and could also communicate to the public, part of their mandate. By good fortune, the current trio, Jean-Laurent Felizia, Stan Alaguillaume and Isabelle Jacquelin, have ideal qualifications. Jean-Laurent and Stan are former head gardeners of the Domaine du Rayol, Mediterranean gardens first created further up the coast by Gilles Clément, while Stan and Isabelle have published a guide to Mediterranean home gardening. But even before their arrival, APS had incorporated Gilles Clément's approach to Mediterranean ecosystems. The designer's famous "moving garden" (jardin en mouvement), first perfected in his own home garden, referred not to plant migrations but to a single ecosystem progressing towards climax in a temperate climate. Human intervention limits and guides spontaneous growth. In gravel, as at the MuCem, plants readily self-sow. Today, for example, Stan removes euphorbias from the Biblical garden while encouraging them elsewhere. Permanent plant labels are problematic since populations shift. Three parts of the MuCem gardens are allowed to evolve as "moving gardens": the wild salad garden, the olive grove meadow and the garrigue gardens.

"GARDENERS FIND THE SOIL IS OFTEN TOO RICH AND MUST REMOVE ORGANIC MATTER SUCH AS FALLEN LEAVES"



ABOVE *Cistus albidus* and iron gate.

BELOW The Aromatic Walkway, potager beds ready for planting and the Scented Garrigue Garden, and deck chairs.



OLIVIER FILIPPI

Olivier and Clara Filippi's nursery near Montpellier sits on land inherited from Clara's wine-growing family. They study wild ecosystems all around the Mediterranean, selecting and developing plants adaptable to home gardens. Their clients include many top international designers. Olivier has published two books: *The Dry Gardening Handbook* and *Alternatives au gazon* (soon to be published in English). www.jardin-sec.com



At the same time, Clément's later themes of plant nomadism and the planetary perspective are clearly represented here as well. Today's gardeners would like this site to become a showcase for Mediterranean humanist ecology.

"THE AGENCY SOUGHT TO MAKE 'GARDENS OF HAPPINESS, CREATED THROUGH THE ACCUMULATION OF MANY SMALL THINGS'"

Dynamic ecosystems

Everyone enjoys these gardens which easily absorb large numbers of visitors. Old townspeople reminisce; children explore, play and learn. A compendium of local heritage, the promenade also partakes of international trends that now favour site-generated works incorporating layers of the past. Yet the MuCem gardens are never abstract; their distillations of larger landscapes continue to live on, a dynamic set of ecosystems, not a museum display. They make strong use of geometry without symmetry, experienced as part of nature rather than its opposite. Plantings appeal to all the senses, since Mediterranean plants offer a particularly rich range of scents, textures and savours in all seasons.

The APS agency from the start sought to make "gardens of happiness, created through the accumulation of many small things." Unfortunately, the museum administration has been slow to appreciate and promote its gardens. But late in 2014, the Fort Saint Jean promenade received a prestigious national prize in the "Victoires du paysage" competition. Greater recognition is sure to follow as the world discovers and enjoys this unique creation. ○



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Architect Ricciotti's MuCem façade; Garigue Garden with La Major church, and self sown euphorbias; Entrance court with iron pergola.