

Les Jardins de Laois



[GALLIC GARDENS](#)

[Isabelle and Tanguy de Toulgoët at their home in Laois.](#)

[PHOTOGRAPH: JANE POWERS](#)

JANE POWERS

GARDENS: A French genius has produced an exotic acre with a profusion of fruit, vegetables and flowers

A FELLOW GARDENER and I are at Tanguy and Isabelle de Toulgoët's home outside Durrow, Co Laois – a neat acre or so that they share with their two little girls, Corentine and Jeanne, Samantha the Jack Russell terrier, two lovely ponies (one solemn, one not), and assorted geese and hens.

We are looking enviously at a small crop of perfect melons hanging from vines in the polytunnel. They are Vert Grimpant, an old French heirloom variety. “In the north of France, when you can grow melon, you are a good gardener,” says Tanguy.

And (I might add here) when you’re in Co Laois, you’re a genius if you can get a melon plant to produce a single fruit, let alone several plump green spheres per vine. But Tanguy is a man of great method and expertise – which together amount to genius in gardening. He has a system for everything. Those melons, for instance, are planted with just the right amount of additional compost (less than you might think), are limited to three or four fruits per plant, and are bolstered with various natural potions and lotions to ease their passage to perfect melonhood.

Tanguy is acutely aware of the tiny relationships in nature that make a huge difference to the ultimate health of a garden. Take bacteria, for example (the good kind): “I am talking a lot about bacteria to people, because bacteria are so much a part of the garden.” Which is why he doesn’t use tap water on his plants. “I couldn’t water my tunnel with chlorine or bleach, the smell was like a swimming pool,” he says. And, it was harming the beneficial micro-organisms. So, he installed a rainwater harvest system that collects the run-off from the roofs. The storage tank holds 8,000 litres and is sufficient for the garden and the polytunnel. “It cost a fortune but it means I can do my own thing.”

His own thing also involves harnessing the power of nature in ways that will be new to many gardeners. He sees certain weeds, such as dock, dandelion and thistle, as valuable resources. Their massive root systems can access nutrients in the soil that other plants are unable to get at. “You can use them as a fertiliser, because they will bring all the goodies that other plants cannot extract.” Most of the time, the plants are chopped up, fermented with water and made into liquid feeds, which are then applied at a very dilute rate, one part feed to 30

or 50 parts of water, depending on the use. Besides the above wild plants, Tanguy also uses nettles, yarrow, comfrey and horsetail to make nutritious brews. “You must be careful of the seeds. Don’t use them when they are in seed, unless you sieve them carefully,” he cautions.

There are more satisfyingly wholesome concoctions in use in the polytunnel, where – besides melons – there are cucumber, tomatoes, peppers, aubergines, French beans, purslane, basil and many other edibles, all in the pink of health. But there is no time to mention them here, or we would miss the main event, which is the productive garden.

The plot measures about 400sq m, and offers a profusion of fruit, vegetables and flowers. Among the last are blowsy pink and white lavatera, sherbety coloured dahlias, ember-orange calendula, cool cornflowers and sugar-sweet sweetpea. “A lot of people would ask ‘Why the flowers?’ ” remarks Tanguy. “And you can say ‘for your wife?’ ” he answers, the perfectly gallant Frenchman. “And then, they’re good for the bees and beneficial insects too,” he adds, with Gallic practicality.

Everything in this part of the garden is rotated, but not using the rotation patterns familiar to traditional gardeners. Instead, Tanguy uses the biodynamic model, where the plants are grouped into root, leaf, fruit and flower crops. All are grown in parallel rows, which do not follow the lines of the house or the property, but are angled in relation to the sun. Each rotation section is bounded by meticulously trained apple trees, which will be grafted together when they meet, in the fullness of time. (The garden is young: the oldest parts are four years old. The family came to this house five years ago, although they moved to Ireland in 1995, from outside Paris. Tanguy worked initially

as a fly-fishing guide, then spent several years creating an impressive vegetable garden at nearby Castle Durrow Hotel.)

All is hale and hearty here: plump cabbages, ripening tomatoes, fine upstanding chard, richly plumed asparagus, calabrese going for a second flush of florets, leeks bobbing with mauve tennis balls of flower – and much more. A plot of corn, beans and squash illustrates the Native American concept of “three sisters” companion planting. The corn offers a climbing frame for the beans, as well as shade for the squash; and the huge leaves and scrambling habit of the squash act as a moisture-retaining and weed-suppressing mulch for its two colleagues. Nearby, the tufty heads of pink and red bergamot, and the flowers of sundry other herbs attract bees, hoverflies and butterflies.

There is an agreeable and pretty informality in this plot, which shows that a charming family garden may also be a place of great prolificness. There is always something fresh to eat here (including lamb’s lettuce and spinach in the chill days of winter), and Isabelle’s kitchen is well-stocked with jars and bottles of preserved foods that came from this soil.

If you fancy learning more about having your own productive and pleasing patch, the de Toulgoët’s recently established Dunmore Country School will be of interest. Tanguy gives garden-related courses, as well as offering a service to help people set up a similar garden at home. Isabelle, meanwhile, is considering teaching French country kitchen skills. It’s all new and flexible now (and exciting), so the couple are open to suggestions. jpowers@irishtimes.com

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