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CHAUMONT 2010



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France's six-month 'Festival International de Jardins' in the Loire Valley, is in its 19th year – and it's both thriving and expanding... ➤

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Chaumont, a dreamy little village on the banks of the River Loire tucked between Blois and Tours, has everything going for it in terms of views, climate, heritage, wine, food and, of course, the mandatory chateau. This one is small, with fairy-tale turrets, and was once owned by Catherine de Médici who entertained Nostradamus here. Since 2008, the Domaine de Chaumont-sur-Loire has been run by the Région Centre and embraces the garden festival, the Château, an extensive arts exhibition in the park, and the wider grounds.

Visitor numbers have risen from 130,000 in 2007 to 360,000 in 2009, and there are plans to extend the current 19-hectare site to 51 hectares by buying back land previously owned by the Château in its heyday. This year, thanks to major sponsor, Philips the lighting company, visitors can see a spectacular light show in the evenings provided by low-energy diodes.

Director of the Domaine de Chaumont-sur-Loire Chantal Colleu-Dumond, a classicist by training, is responsible for maintaining the balance between art and horticulture at the festival – what she calls ‘the green thread of horticulture’ that pulls

it all together. The French are perhaps more inclined to see the garden as an enhancement of life in the same way that art is, and if Chaumont doesn't seem as cutting edge as it did back in the early '90s, it's probably because, over the years, we have been more exposed to this way of thinking.

Nevertheless, creating a garden that will look good for six months is still an exacting task for the designers. There are no prizes – the element of competition is in being chosen to exhibit. The selection process is lengthy and entrants – usually about 300 from across Europe – send in their ideas in October. The ratio is 70 per cent French, 30 per cent from other countries, but the Director is keen to expand the number of international entries.

By the end of the year, 60 applicants will have been put through a pre-selection process by a panel of 13 judges, with a wide range of expertise, not just in horticulture but also in architecture, the arts and medicine. This year, the president of the jury was a neuroscientist, and the jury included four landscape architects, an artist, an author and a psychiatrist. Numbers are whittled down and the final

Above: Labyrinth Of The Mind was created by the Château's own gardeners who have planted a vineyard on the original footprint of a maze found during archaeological excavations. The poles are temporary, but the vines will be there for decades to come

22 are chosen. Exhibitors cannot return for three years, which ensures that new talent gets a look in each year. In addition, four or five artists and other practitioners are given *Les Cartes Vertes*, whereby they are invited to exhibit and are, literally, given cartes blanches to design or install whatever they like. This year's green cards went to Michel Racine and Béatrice Suarel, Anne and Patrick Poirier, Jean-Pierre Le Dantec and Benjamin Millepied.

Funding the gardens

To designers brought up on RHS shows and the hassle to find sponsorship to fund a garden, the thinking behind this festival comes as something of a culture shock. Designers receive up to 15,000 Euros to which sponsorship money can be added. The gardens are larger (about 240m²) than any typical British show garden, but they are all of equal size. Hornbeam hedges mark now well-established boundaries and offer a sense of enclosure that enables the visitor to focus without distraction. To eyes accustomed to the standards expected of Chelsea gardens, the first impression is of too much bare soil, but planting will grow and mesh and the gardens tend to look



much better later on in the season.

This year's theme is *Jardins corps et âme* ('Body and Soul'), which gave the designers much to mull over – poetically and dramatically. **Contactez-moi**, by a French team of graphic designers and landscape architects, looks at the issue of 'care' and uses a huge linear wooden cabinet housing a herbarium and many other treasures as a sensory wall. If not quite a garden, it was a remarkably effective device and really popular with children who found its nooks and crannies and medicine jars fascinating.

The sole English garden by duo George Richardson and Jules Arthur, **Posh Tea, Posh People**, uses the somewhat clichéd theme of an English tea party, threading tea cups and saucers through thick stems of willows and emphasising, through some native planting, the restorative powers of assorted types of tea for body and mind. The French, however, love it, and while we just accept that a 'cuppa' does you good, they have elevated their *tisanes* to another level.

Chaumont's original slogan was 'Come and steal our ideas', but certain ideas seem to have been seized simultaneously by just about every designer. Luminous red, yellow, ➤



Above: A wall of 250 teacups features in **Posh Tea, Posh People**, from UK exhibitor, PIP Partnership;

Inset: **Contactez-moi** by Loïc Nys, graphic artist, Sébastien Roussel, landscape architect, Cécile Larcher, architect and Sébastien Migné from France, features a huge piece of furniture containing a variety of treasures

Left: **Cupid s'en Fout** (Didier Courant, architect /town planner, Philipp Robert, visual artist/ video-maker, Gilles Pujol, city engineer, Ronan Séné, landscape architect and Yann Bruneau, town planner & environmentalist, France) explores the vagaries of Cupid's arrows among the plantings of cabbages and roses



Luminous red, yellow, green and pink sticks or poles can be seen dotted across the showground

➤ green and pink sticks or poles can be seen dotted across the showground. Clouds of water mist spray, too, are present in a variety of incarnations.

Painted poles are certainly evident in **Cupidon s'en Fout** (Cupid Doesn't Give A Damn), based on 'cabbages and roses' – the French equivalent of 'under the gooseberry bush' (where babies are found). Luminous pink sticks representing Cupid's arrows dominate a garden planted logically, if not excitingly, with cabbages and roses.

More luminosity comes from a selection of very tall, bright-coloured poles in the maze or **Labyrinth Of The Mind** garden, created by the chateau gardeners. It is based on a recent archaeological dig in the grounds, which uncovered the remains of a former ornamental maze. The luminous poles are temporary markers – the young vines that have been planted around their footprint will have a longer life.

Poles and mist are used to good effect in **The Sensory Horticultural Therapy** garden by an Italian partnership. Tall ochre-coloured bamboo poles line paths and lead the way into a 'spa' garden, offering four differing sensations – the sauna garden,

Above: In the **Sensory Horticultural Therapy Garden** by Stefano Marwaz, Francesca Vacirca & Daniela Tonegatti, a sculpture draws visitors into the concept of relaxation and bamboo canes divide the space to give glimpses of the outdoor rooms

where plants release their aromatics swirled around in the mist spray; the massage garden, with plants brushing as you pass; the potager garden for taste enjoyments; and the perfume garden, encouraging people to touch and feel plants. In the centre of this well-executed garden an impressive sculpture of a woman, face downwards, ready to be massaged, symbolises total relaxation. Designer Francesca Vacirca explains how it was created: "we started with hand-drawn sketches and cardboard models to scale, and then created a digital female figure, which we cut in sections. Each section became a panel, which was sent as a CAD file to a blacksmith in Florence. Using a plasma laser he cut each panel and welded the supporting rods to the base. We used steel panels with a waterproof brown paint to keep costs down. The digital model can be reused and the same sculpture can be recreated with other materials, such as corten steel or glass."

The Italians had a strong presence this year and another installation that stood out was **Daydreaming In Nature** where verdigris covered copper sheets were used to make a

stunning planting background for plants. Created by a partnership of an architect and an agronomist, it is about biodiversity – some plants are good, some are dangerous, some are precious – and they have used etched glass and reflective surfaces to highlight the plants. This is one that will definitely benefit from being seen later in the season when the plants will have knitted together.

More an interesting concept than a garden, is the Italian **Pantagruel's Dream** where the soul goes looking for food and finds it in a banquet of plants laid out for a feast on a long table. It is imaginative, if slightly cluttered, but benefits from the borrowed view down to the Loire river just visible through a gap cut in the trees. The black table brings a surreal dream-like feel of hanging suspended and so being detached from the surroundings.

From an east-west collaboration, combining the best of Japan and France, comes a garden dedicated to paper, **Calligrâme**. In Japan, paper is folded up and tucked into trees to pass on wishes to the gods. The Japanese word *kami*, means both 'paper' and 'god'. All plants used ➤



Clockwise from top left:
Daydreaming in Nature (Francesca Fornasari, architect and Elisabetta Fermani, agronomist, Italy) is a trip of reflection looking at the historical relationships between man and nature; An absence of flowers in the French/Japanese garden
Calligrâme (Hélène Le Merdy, architect, Michaël Ripoché, horticultural engineer, Jean-Michel Letellier and Miki Nakamura, artists, France & Japan) accentuates the drama of mulberry bark in Perspex sheets;
Pantagruel's Dream designed by Italian team, Carlotta Montefoschi, architect, Niccolo Cau, Elsa Pandozi, Maria Cecilia Villanis Ziani, Nelda Tripicchio and Ricardo Walker Campos, features a table lushly planted as if laid for a banquet



here can be made into paper: bamboos, papyrus and hemp. Mulberry bark is sliced thinly and put between transparent panels to great effect. Hemp as thick as rope makes a tactile partitioning and is woven between young birch trees to hold them together as a screen.

This is one of the most elegant gardens at the show. The shape – a combination of curves and rectangles within rectangles – pulls you in, encloses you and gives a feeling of spaces within spaces. Thick sheets of embossed glass act as sculptures and wide gravel paths symbolise ‘the river of life’ that leads you along the way. Water lies still in rills (with just the merest hint of a water mist cloud) and the planting is all green. There are no flowers to distract from the concentration of shape and form.

A garden by three French designers entitled **My Earth Mother** uses lines of trained green willow – a variation on the poles theme – to lead into a central vortex (the womb of the earth mother) where a circle of willow stems, stripped back to bleached wheaten whips, are arched backwards tapering to soft ends and bent to form relaxed chairs. It is very natural and

pleasing on the eye, and the planting is equally natural with delicate white *Polemium caeruleum*, *Phlox divaricata* and *Geranium pratense* against dark fennel and darker poppies.

A ghostly optical illusion, that grabs public attention, is a garden with a glasshouse and random chairs that seem to float on a darkened pool of water – as if everything is skating on ice. This entry is called **Angels’ Hair**, and the greenhouse is hung with the silver airplant *Tillandsia usneoides* as ‘a plant without a beginning or an end. Untouchable in its glass box, like some supernatural being’. Strong reflections in the dark water create the feeling of something having gently floated down – which might just as easily float away again.

A grand piano in the garden? Of course – for a Dutch homage to soul singer Billy Holliday, **Homage to Lady Day**. It sits in a planting of *Papaver somniferum*, white malva and frothy gypsophila, all surrounded by a black fence. The music, via speakers positioned in the planting, is surprisingly evocative but will the piano withstand six months exposure to the elements? Does it matter? This is Chaumont, after all.

Clockwise from above left: **Homage to Lady Day**, encourages visitors to sit and contemplate this hybrid garden/jazz lounge whilst listening to music; Marchalot and Fortuna’s ethereal **Angels’ hair**, uses *Tillandsia usneoides* as an extension of the soul floating above the highly reflective surface of shallow water; the central vortex of the **My Earth Mother** garden by Olivier Hostiou, Marie Foret and Laurent Weiss, features natural planting and represents the womb

So, 20 plus gardens, a few dozen art installations, a wonderful old castle, spectacular views of the languid Loire river and six months exposure to the visiting public. What’s not to like about Chaumont? Director Chantal says she is more than delighted to hear from any Brits who might like to apply – and British designers have much they could bring to the party. ➤

Sources

Domaine de Chaumont-sur-Loire: +33 054 209922, www.domaine-chaumont.fr
The 19th Chaumont-sur-Loire International Garden Festival continues until 17 October 2010. Evening visits from 10pm to midnight for illuminations, daily between 1 July and 31 August, and on Saturdays from 1-15 September.