

A tale of two gardens – Lincoln to Lauzerte

Margaret Brown



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Fig. 1 Our view of Lauzerte.

In 1989 I met a man in a garden and that meeting was to dramatically change everything! The owner of a small Lincolnshire nursery invited me to a meeting of the newly formed Lincolnshire Group of the Hardy Plant Society, thus changing my life and future career. After three years as a committee member I became chairman in 2001. My husband John was the projectionist for the winter meetings and a friend and I organised the group holidays. Our garden opened for the NGS and other charities. We loved every minute of it. When we both took early retirement, John and I set up Great Garden Getaways, where we discovered that taking gardeners on short holidays in the UK and in the winter to Madeira was a great privilege and joy.

After seven years we retired for the second time. We had gardened on the outskirts of the city of Lincoln for almost forty years. We turned 1,100 square metres of flat, extremely light, well-drained sandy loam into a garden bursting at the seams with hardy perennials, plus an increasing number of tender plants from Madeira, over-wintered in our two greenhouses. The soil was so light and well drained that it was almost always possible to work on the garden. Sadly, that soil was hopeless for retaining nutrients.



Fig. 2 The National Collection of two-pronged forks

We agreed that the time had come to downsize. So, what did we do? After talking about it for 30 years, we finally bought a house in Lauzerte in the Tarn et Garonne, in south-west France. It is almost twice as big as our Lincoln home with a garden of 2,500 square metres. Hardly downsizing, is it? Everything about our new plot is different and more difficult. The soil is very heavy clay, parts of which can lie under water in winter. It becomes a skating rink after rain and in mid-July an impenetrable, hard baked crust with two-inch-wide cracks. It is on a slope which we have now terraced. Our drive has an incline of 1 in 4. Previously surrounded by houses, we are now bordered by fields. To our left, this year's crop was barley. Here's hoping that next year may

bring sunflowers. To the right is a meadow, with orchids, which is cut for silage. The views from our garden and balcony are spectacular. To the south we look across the valley of the little River Lendou, to the arable fields, vineyards and orchards beyond. To the west we have a magnificent view of our medieval hilltop village, Lauzerte, classed as one of the most beautiful villages in France (fig. 1). We feel very proud as this government category lists only 144 French villages.

Are you impressed to know that we hold the French National Collection of two-pronged forks? John struggled on with a four-pronged fork which quickly became three and then reduced itself to two prongs. Two others quickly followed their brother. Conventional digging is out. Garden forks are no match for our heavy clay unless soil conditions are perfect, so a 'motoculteur' is the answer. We have a Merry Tiller for finer work but borrow our neighbour's heavy-duty cultivator for the initial heavy graft.

So what is a typical French garden? In our region of the Quercy Blanc, (named after the white stone), a small front garden will have a lawn, a pampas grass and a conifer. The only colour will be from the pots or window boxes of scarlet pelargoniums. Occasionally there may be a hedge between properties. They seem very keen on 'pretty' hedges. When we bought *Photinia x fraseri* 'Red Robin' to replace a conifer hedge which was well past its sell-by date, our neighbour wondered why we didn't buy a yellow-leaved plant (I think she meant the variegated eleagnus) to plant alternately with the photinia. Wow! If the front or back garden is large then trees, one each of perhaps fifteen different varieties, will

be planted like pieces on a chess board. All planted singly and equidistant. Garden design has no part to play in this arrangement. What is the deciding factor? They must be spaced so that the master of the house can cut the grass beneath and between the trees riding on his sit-on mower, which is often his only involvement in the garden. House walls may be covered by wisteria in the earlier months, then climbing roses and lastly *Campsis radicans* (trumpets of Jericho).

The rear garden is where it all happens. Fruit trees dominate, as fruit is one of the main farm crops in this region: walnuts, hazelnuts, apples, cherries, apricots, peaches, nectarines, greengage plums and black plums both for eating and for drying into prunes.

Everyone has a potager; its size depends on the number in the family and on the housewife's ability to conserve the fruit and vegetable crop. Over two years our potager took shape (figs 2, 3 & 4) and it's now highly productive (figs 5, 6, 7 & 8). Even with a freezer, a lot of preserving is still done in Kilner-type jars. In our sous-sol (the ground floor which resembles a huge cellar) we have enough preserves to feed the whole village in the event of a third world war. We learn from our neighbours and we have adopted their potager watering methods. They run trickle



Fig. 3 Our potager when we moved in.



Fig. 4 Potager cleared, boxes of plants from England – waiting.



Fig. 5 2008, retaining walls in place and under construction.



Fig. 6 John with our first pasteque – a speciality of the region, rather like cream-coloured watermelon. Fantastic for jam.

hose along the length of the vegetable rows when the plants are young. The plants grow up over the hose and in summer the hose is connected to a water pipe which waters the rows in turn, by just moving the connection onto the next row. It is usual to call in the local water diviner and sink a well for all garden watering. There will also be water tanks of every shape and construction. Even the smallest potager will produce French beans, tomatoes, courgettes,

onions, garlic and lettuce. Meals always include a simple bowl of tossed lettuce, served after the meat. The larger potagers will grow many different vegetables. Peas and broad beans are always planted in autumn. The peas climb up nets to a height of 4+ feet. Much easier to pick that way! Our neighbours only eat potatoes about twice a week. They get their carbohydrates from the vast quantities of bread they consume with every meal.

To complete his garden, the Frenchman has his livestock. Our wonderful neighbours, who live across the road, rear chickens, rabbits, guinea fowl, geese, ducks and turkeys. In addition to regular gifts of poultry, fruit and vegetables, we haven't had to buy an egg since we arrived.

After living here for nearly two years, there is one thing I miss more than anything else. It is talking about plants to equally enthusiastic fellow gardeners, plus being able to describe plants accurately by using their Latin plant names. My French friends don't recognise Latin names and, what's more confusing, use the French flower names! Some are quite easy to recognise; pensee, colchique, tulipe for example. But what about pivoine, glycine, rose trémière and perce-neige? Better known to us as peony, wisteria, hollyhock and snowdrop (whose French name literally means 'pierce the snow').

In January 2009 John and I became involved with a new group called Vivre Ensemble en Quercy (Living together in Quercy). Its purpose is to help newcomers to integrate into the village and surrounding area and to encourage all nationalities to work together. Guess who offered to set up a Garden Group? Correct. Moi! Thirty-one people attended our inaugural meeting at the end of January. They were mainly English with French, Dutch and Germans who all had

varying garden interests. Some have very basic gardening knowledge, including one member who thought that tomato plants would come up every year. Six months later our membership stands at 70 and still growing. I ran a Seed Workshop and I am planning a Propagation Workshop. The loudest cries for help come from mainly English members who left a town house with a very small garden and now have a property with two hectares and they don't know where to start. Members are so eager to learn and the emerging seeds from the Seed Workshop produced excitement you would never imagine in a group of mainly senior citizens. Our mayor is very supportive and we meet monthly, rent-free, in our modern village hall.

We recently experienced a steep learning curve as emails shot round the group asking 'Have you any 'doryphores'? We quickly learned that a doryphore is a Colorado beetle. Imagine the uproar in the UK if this happened. I recalled the posters of my childhood, telling us that the authorities must be notified if we ever came across such a pest. Our neighbours do not seem unduly worried as they



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Figs 7, 8 & 9 Squashes, tomatoes, white, rose and violet garlic



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Fig. 10 April 2009: Place aux Fleurs in Lauzerte village square.



Fig. 11 Margaret (second from left) staffs the Garden Group's stand.

demonstrate, plus the children's holiday club, which is held during school holidays at the local equestrian centre. The children were enthralled.

So, now to our French garden. A month after we and our furniture arrived from the UK in October 2007, a second removal lorry delivered our plants (fig. 11). Sadly, we had to leave many of our treasures behind. Choosing was a nightmare. On arrival they stayed in their pots until the ground was cleared, terraced and prepared for planting (approximately 100 plants still remain in their pots). Planting was delayed while John and a couple of neighbours built 102 metres of retaining walls with cavity building blocks, working throughout the winter, weather permitting. The walls still await their coating of render and hope-

grow only a few early potatoes but you can imagine our horror when we found our potatoes were covered with both the black-and-yellow-striped adults and the red, squashy, ladybird-like juveniles. They eat the leaves leaving only the ribs. Spraying does not work so several times a day we pick them off by hand and check under the leaves for eggs. John's method of destroying them is to collect them in a bucket for cremation. I just drop them onto the drive and jump on them. Nothing lives after that treatment.

In spring each year Lauzerte holds a Place aux Fleurs (Flower Fair) in the village square and the Garden Group produced a display (figs 9 & 10). Garden clubs are quite rare in France. I suggested a competition for children to make a garden on a plate. This resulted in visits to the infants' school to

fully they will eventually be hidden by climbing and trailing plants (fig. 12).

I decided from the outset that all plants would have to take their chance of survival, as the terrain and climatic conditions were unknown to me. We know the area well, having stayed on holiday nearby with French farming friends for 26 years, but as we usually visited in September the rest of the year's conditions were a mystery. The biggest climatic difference is the huge swing in winter temperatures in 24 hours. We regularly have overnight temperatures of -8°C while by two o'clock next afternoon the temperature has shot to 16°C .

Hardy perennials are best in April and May. Roses peak in May, about a month ahead of Lincolnshire. Cannas, hedychium and dahlias were left in the ground last winter and all have survived. I'm glad I didn't listen to the books. The real stars have been *Scilla peruviana* (why doesn't everyone grow this?) (fig. 13), *Convolvulus cneorum*, *Eryngium planum* 'Flüela' (fig. 14) and *E. bourgatii*, *Oenothera speciosa* 'Siskyou' (fig.15), *Scabiosa atropurpurea* 'Chile Black' and *Anemone coronaria* De Caen Group. The anemone corms were bought very cheaply from our local Lidl and after soaking in water overnight, they were planted ten to a pot. When the foliage was 5cm tall, plants were transferred to the front of the borders where they gave a brilliant display for three months and were great for cutting. Wonderful value! Later-flowering



Fig. 12 October 2007: a second removal lorry arrived a month after the furniture, this time filled with plants.



Fig. 13 June 2009: 'cool' border left, 'hot' border right.



Fig. 14 Pale pink *Oenothera speciosa* 'Siskyou' spreads like wildfire in the 'hot' border.



Fig. 15 *Scilla peruviana* thrives in the clay.



Fig. 16 *Eryngium* 'Flüela' grows a good 60cm taller than in Lincoln.

perennials have been a disappointment, although I must not forget that these herbaceous borders are only one year old.

Since moving here I have realised that my days of trying to grow almost all hardy perennials known to man are at an end. I remember fondly the 40+ years of their being a big part of our lives but now the time has come for change. Parts of the garden will have a different emphasis, and I am already enjoying the colourful display of pelargoniums and mandevilla on our long balcony. Of course, in true French style, I have placed a pot of red pelargoniums on each step of our outside staircase.

And finally... our greatest garden joy is walking round our partly completed plot, remembering the friends who came with us, in spirit, through their plants. Some from cuttings and seeds, some from the HPS seed exchange, some received as presents and a vast number from our local HPS sales table. We treasure them all and hope that they, like us, feel settled and happy. 🐛

Margaret Brown, as you can see, relishes her new life and new gardening. Margaret and John warmly welcome HPS members as B&B guests.
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