

EXPERIENCING SOME OF THE BEAUTIFUL GARDENS OF NORTHERN FRANCE

Last September, my husband and I spent three weeks touring the gardens of Normandy, France. I found these gardens very educational and thought I would share some of what I learned. I will preface this with a qualification: gardening in the best possible climate and with excellent soil is much easier to be a successful gardener. One could hardly ask for a climate more suitable for gardening than northern France. There is plenty of sunshine; the winters are mild; the summer days are 16 hours long! And, there usually is enough rain not to require irrigation. We visited 11 gardens, each unique in its own way. One, Giverny, is among the most famous gardens in the world. I have always wanted to visit Giverny and it did not disappoint. I had read a lot about it, but the visit gave me a much greater appreciation of the scale and the complexity of the color combinations. What was noticeable was the density of the plantings. Where in my garden, I may have three of the same plants in a bed with 6" -8" spaces between them in Giverny, there would be twice as many with hardly any space between them. I queried one of the gardeners and she said that the usual regularity of rainfall makes the density possible. The color palette was bold, with lots of purples and reds punctuated with white flowers that magnified the deep colors.



The most unusual gardens were in Amiens. These are 750 acres of floating peat at the mouth of the river Somme. Because of the peat, they are extremely fertile, with three harvests a year. The owners, called 'hortillons' (market gardeners) have lived on this floating paradise for generations. Access is by silent electrical boats only. As the boats glide near the edge of the garden, they are very careful about damaging the soil. One resident I spoke with said that the edges are very fragile and the peat must be refurbished annually. There were dozens of vegetable

crops ranging from roots such as turnips and beets to green leafy products such as lettuce and kale. Although the emphasis is on farming, the banks of the island are covered with brightly colored annuals and each farm/house competes for having the best sculptures made of materials they grow, ranging from carved birds and bridges to amazing scarecrows.

Speaking of sculptures, all the gardens we visited had some art and sculpture present. The most intriguing is the garden at Etretat. This garden is on top of a cliff towering 200 feet over the Atlantic Ocean. The garden borrows all the magnificence of the natural landscape. It is heavily sloped, allowing one to see much of the garden, whether looking up or down the cliffs. As one walks down the hillside, the sculpted heads, sometimes with music playing as if the heads are talking to you, blend in with the rounded and sculpted shrubs. The permanent sculptures are enhanced with dotted other sculptures featuring student artists. The blend of landscape art and sculptures makes the gardens a delight for both garden and art lovers and of course, the dramatic natural landscape only adds to the drama.

