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# *Bellevue Ballue*

With its long and turbulent history, the garden at Château de la Ballue in Brittany, France is prestigious yet retains the intimate feel of a private garden

Author: **Sarah Higgins**, a horticultural journalist living in France. Photography: **Allan Pollok-Morris**



Viewed from the first-floor windows, the smaller terrace at La Ballue contains a parterre of symmetrical patterns, made up of topiary hexagons and globes, and a wave hedge of yew.





**L**a Ballue is masked by trees. As you wind uphill through farmland towards the plateau where it sits, only a horizontal line of trained lime trees hints at the island of sophistication ahead: a 17th-century château and remarkable 2ha (5 acre) terraced garden. This garden satisfies on many levels: its past is interesting, its design masterly, and its owner a source of inspiration on how to take a listed historic garden forward.

La Ballue is probably best known for its topiary. In 2012 the garden was given an award by the European Boxwood and Topiary Society for its clipped forms, many of which have taken 40 years to perfect. Shrubs have become sublime sculptures which decorate the garden, defining its structure and creating mood.

### Garden layout

Yew (*Taxus baccata*) columns divide the south-facing terrace into two gardens of contrasting character. The smaller one is a formal parterre of grass triangles and disciplined, geometrical topiary. It is aligned with the centre of the château's façade and designed to be viewed from the first floor. The symmetrical pattern of topiary hexagons, triangles and globes in yew, box and golden privet corresponds with the elegant building.

The other, larger part is a labyrinthine garden where mystery and emotion rule. Branching paths on a disjointed diagonal design lead to various hedged enclosures (bosquets), each with its own theme. Changes in atmosphere are made using light and shade, closed and open spaces. Views between the bosquets are cleverly controlled – at certain points long vistas suddenly appear, and the effect is disorientating. Unlike the parterre, which opens onto a wide view of the Breton countryside, the diagonal garden looks inward.

### An historic garden

La Ballue is clearly flourishing, but has known periods of turbulence and neglect. In 1620 a fortress built in the 11th century was replaced by the >>>



present château. No record remains of the garden as it was then, nor in the 18th century when the estate was confiscated during the French Revolution and its archives burnt. A long decline followed, and by 1945 it lay deserted.

Claude Arthaud arrived in 1973 and, although there were holes in the roof and potatoes growing on the terrace, she fell in love with La Ballue and immediately began renovating. She involved two avant-garde architects: her husband, François Hébert-Stevens, who designed the parterre; and Paul Maymont, who devised the diagonal garden. The result is a rare example of 1970s French garden art, produced at a time when gardens were not highly regarded.

Through her work as a publisher, Claude was aware of the latest ideas in art, literature and cinema. However, she did not seek to make a statement about 1970s design or to break new ground. Rather, the garden resulted from an inventive frenzy among friends, who drew on broad cultural interests and a range of historic and contemporary influences to create something original. They conjured with Italian Mannerism yet designed a maze around a project by Le Corbusier; the parterre reflects both the golden mean and cubism.



In May, waterfall-like wisteria flows between the yew topiary that separates the parterre from the diagonal garden.

## La Ballue

Château de la Ballue, 35560 Bazouges-la-Pérouse, Brittany, France; tel (from UK) 0033 (2) 99 97 47 86; [www.laballuegarden.com](http://www.laballuegarden.com)

**Summary:** ordered grass and topiary parterre contrasts with a maze-like 'diagonal' garden leading to various surprises. Views out to the landscape.

**Conditions:** mild/temperate climate; warm summers and occasional frosts.

**Size:** 2 ha (5 acres).

**Soil:** slightly acid, generally rich silt.

**Age:** château dates from 1620; garden laid out from 1973 on 17th-century terrace.

**Open:** 15 Mar-1 Nov, 10.30am-6.30pm.

Adults €9; free for children under 10. Guided group tours by appointment.



Marie-Françoise Mathiot-Mathon and family.

## Gradual changes

The garden is by turns playful and perfectionist, sober and extravagant. Thanks to the thoughtful approach of its current owner, Marie-Françoise Mathiot-Mathon, La Ballue still has the intimacy of a private garden. 'I wanted it to be accessible to visitors without losing its prestigious character,' she says.

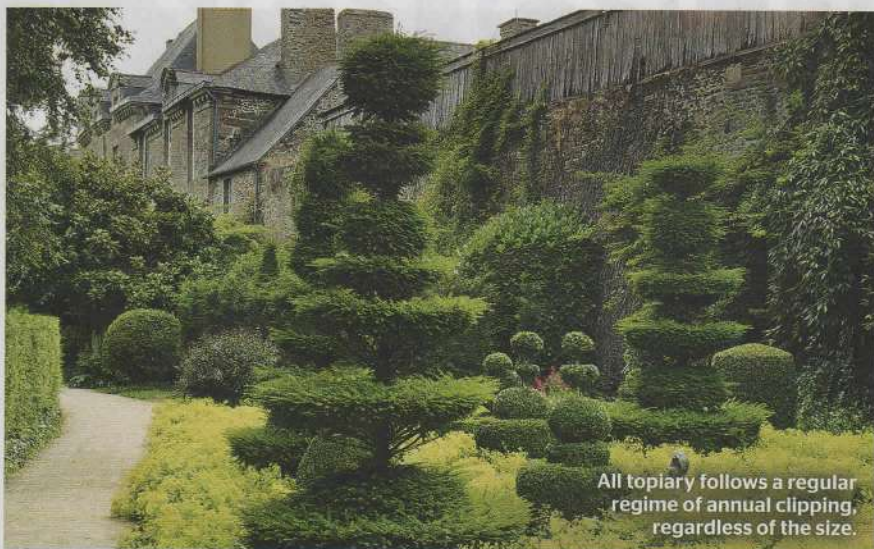
When Marie-Françoise found La Ballue in 2005, she too was captivated. During the past seven years she has turned it into a beautiful family home and hotel, while breathing new life into the garden. A self-taught gardener, she discovered a love of trees when restoring a 19th-century park.

She assessed the garden for a year before making any adjustments. 'It looked to me as if it was slowly dying,' she says. After Claude had left

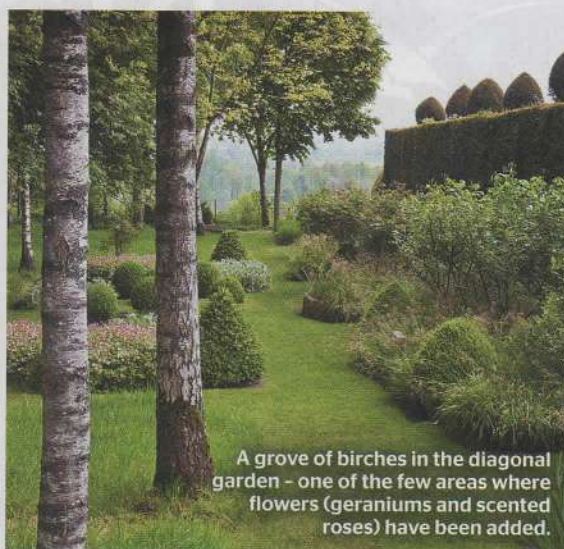
in 1989, the château was empty until 1995 when the first steps were taken to protect the garden. However, Marie-Françoise concluded that a higher level of maintenance was essential. She began by feeding the soil, replacing dead plants, and taking some fundamental decisions: switching from mains to well water, from chemicals to hand weeding.

Most importantly, she put all topiary and hedges on a regular regime of clipping, regardless of size. Keeping this extent of clipped surface crisp and dense is a challenge renewed every year. Whatever is reachable by ladder, scaffolding or cherry picker is tackled by a team of four gardeners, who prune from June to September. Starting with the yews, they continue round the garden on box, cherry laurel, hornbeam, beech, privet, bay, *Osmanthus*, *Thuja* and

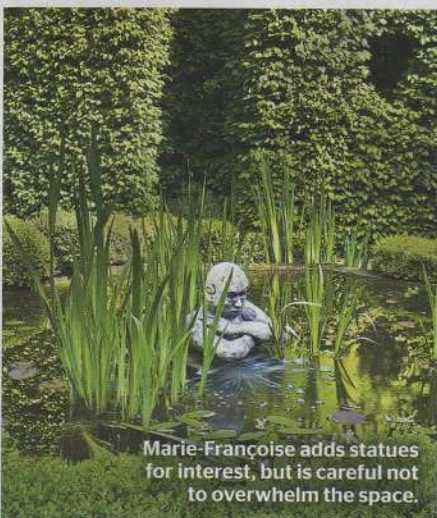




All topiary follows a regular regime of annual clipping, regardless of the size.



A grove of birches in the diagonal garden - one of the few areas where flowers (geraniums and scented roses) have been added.



Marie-Françoise adds statues for interest, but is careful not to overwhelm the space.

*'Keeping this amount of clipped surface crisp and dense is a challenge renewed every year.'*

Despite its regular hard pruning, the green architecture of the garden slowly gets taller, wider, bigger. Soon the top 50cm (1½ft) of the maze will come off to let light into its base, and the wave hedge will eventually need cutting back to eyelevel. The parterre is also shifting imperceptibly, even though its grass triangles are edged with utmost accuracy. Survey markers and metal edging will fix its design in the long term.

Marie-Françoise has introduced a programme of events to attract visitors. 'I must lead La Ballue towards tomorrow, with a vision for its evolution.' A big project ahead is the restoration of the medieval walls of the terrace, 3m (10ft) thick and collapsing in places. She says that her creativity here is limited, yet it takes artistry to blend the contributions made by successive people, face the changes caused by time, and arrive at a coherent whole.

Her own refinements include some effectively placed modern sculpture. 'Statues add an interesting element but must not overwhelm,' she says. She has opened the entrance court to visitors, to show the château's northern façade, and is developing a boxwood collection in the moat. In the main garden Marie-Françoise has added floral touches such as bulbs

to accompany the myriad greens of spring, and enriched the variety of scented roses, ferns and ground cover.

It is hard to say what impresses most. I appreciated the attention to detail, such as grass mown spirally in the open-air theatre but left long under birches. Or the springy layer of buckwheat husks underfoot in the Music Chamber; as you sit inside this simple ring of hornbeam, listening to the birds, your eyes rest on the circle of sky framed overhead by the hedge. I will remember La Ballue as a place where I spent more time gazing upwards than down at the ground. ●

Leyland cypress. The gardeners use simple techniques to check their work; a spirit level for straight surfaces, a bamboo cane in the centre of globes to judge symmetry. The parterre is always inspected from the first-floor windows.

## Letting light in

Heavy tree-cover in the diagonal garden was another problem. Some trees were removed, while others were thinned to let light through without altering their natural appearance. A 'tree gang' comes each winter to work at height, and this is a continuation of the plant-sculpting below. A group of mature Monterey pine (*Pinus radiata*) has recently been cloud-pruned to improve the view from the terrace. 'Even trees are controlled,' says Marie-Françoise, who seems to know every branch.



Château de la Ballue has been turned into a family home and hotel, with an impressive and beautiful garden.