

OPPOSITE Rory Cameron's rectangular knot garden is filled in spring with tulips 'New Design' and 'White Triumphant'.
RIGHT The main entrance to the house.
BELOW LEFT *Cistus* *purpureus*.
RIGHT 'Iceberg' roses



Scents of Provence

This secluded garden is a magical distillation of many talents and themes.
By Louisa Jones

PHOTOGRAPHS BY VINCENT MOTTE



Provence has been attracting cosmopolitan settlers ever since the Greeks first landed there in the sixth century BC. Today, many visitors come to create a garden, drawn by landscapes which, as Lawrence Durrell remarked, unite austere Mediterranean beauty with French *savoir vivre*. One of the most original recent creations is without doubt Anne Cox Chambers' domain at Le Petit Fontanille.

Anne came to Provence in 1980, intending only to rent. Then she fell in love with this forty-five-acre farm set in a fragrant, wooded valley on the northern slopes of the Alpilles hills. It had fine old trees, especially an imposing cypress avenue and several good examples of that majestic Mediterranean shade tree, the *micoucoullier*. There was also a neglected vineyard, descendant perhaps of the one planted on the site in 1350 by Doña Constanza of Tarascon. The







LEFT The grande allée of cypresses is flanked by a parterre of olive trees clipped into globes, making one of many beautiful places in which to sit and enjoy the garden. *ABOVE RIGHT* Pots grouped gracefully near the dining-terrace are filled in spring with tulips 'Apricot Beauty' and blue winter-flowering pansies and, in summer, *RIGHT*, with pelargoniums, petunias and marguerite daisies, *Chrysanthemum frutescens*



house was first built in the seventeenth century; in the nineteenth, the owner of the neighbouring château refurbished it as an elegant and convenient retreat for his mistress. He told his wife he had lost the money gambling.

Since 1980, several designers have worked at Le Petit Fontanille, always in close collaboration with Anne - who remains the guiding spirit and, when asked how many gardeners maintain the ten acres of gardens, readily replies: 'Five, including myself.' She is never happier than on an inspection tour with secateurs in hand, protected from the sun by a floppy straw hat.

She first asked advice of the late Peter Coats and he laid out the 'bones' of the garden, concentrating on the land sloping upwards south of the house. The cypress avenue became the *grande allée*, its dark towers lightened by oleanders. A second, less formal path meanders uphill, east of this main axis. Here Coats indulged his passion for foliage gardening, with 'Quicksilver'





ABOVE AND RIGHT Steps leading through Tim Rees' blue bank, bordered with *Lavandula angustifolia* and a pale-flowered *Lavandula dentata*. Leading to a pair of stone lions, *TOP RIGHT*, are bearded irises and the grey-leaved shrub, *Teucrium fruticans*. *ABOVE RIGHT* *Delphinium 'Sky Blue'*. *OPPOSITE, TOP* Tim Rees' blue bank, with Russian sage, *Perovskia atriplicifolia 'Blue Spire'*. *BELOW* The lavender field in late summer. *LEFT* Tall cypresses frame the potager

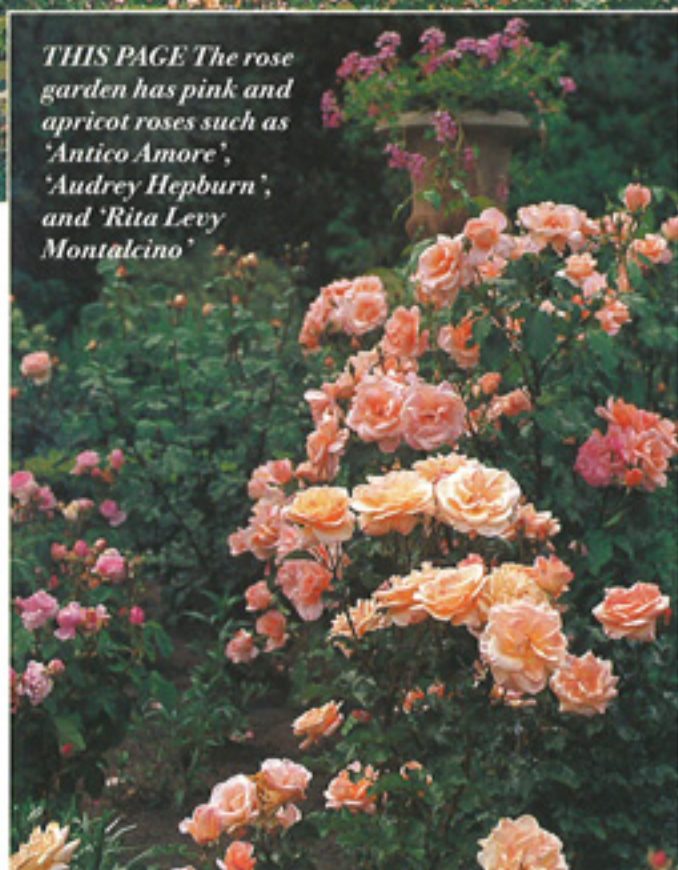




*The garden
is a secluded,
autonomous
haven*



The large, formal rose garden contains Italian, French and English roses



THIS PAGE The rose garden has pink and apricot roses such as 'Antico Amore', 'Audrey Hepburn', and 'Rita Levy Montalcino'

oleasters, wine-leaved berberis and underplantings of *Aegopodium podagraria variegata*. Both routes meet on the upper level at the long pool, invisible from the house. In the woodland beyond a simple obelisk now rises, in honour of Peter Coats. It complements perfectly one of Provence's most unusual pool-houses: an eighteenth-century stone folly moved here from the grounds of a nearby château.

Another early contributor was Rory Cameron, who created a rectangular knot garden around a stone sculpture of a dog. It occupies a half-shaded area above the parking-area, to create a mood of elegant perfection for arriving guests.

On the west side of the estate, separated from the main garden by swathes of lavender and tall shrubs of rosemary, lie the elegant potager and cutting-garden laid out by Rosemary Verey, patterned after her own at Barisley House. These designs manage to be both colourful and formal.

Rosemary Verey also proposed clipping into lollipop shapes the four olive trees of the rectangular parterre west of the *grande allée*. These were once underplanted with David Austin roses, but now rise above pale poppies and anemons with frothy alchemilla of just the right height and hues to set off the dark box outlines around and the silver globes above.

In recent years the garden has almost doubled in size, expanding eastward. Another good friend of Anne, Bertrand de la Haye Jousselein, helped design a large, formal rose garden with a mix of old French, Italian and English roses such as 'Perle d'Or', 'Comte de Chambord' and the delightful 'Antico Amore'. Their billowing beauty contrasts with two sets of box balls, set in the lawn at both ends of the parterre. Deliberately irregular spacing makes these look as if they are on the move, as if they too are strolling through the garden.

At the garden's eastern limit is a broad aromatic border, where every plant is either fragrant or edible. Anne Cox Chambers claims this makes weeding a pleasure. Her initials, a double 'C', have been outlined in white lavender at the entrance to this walk.

Most recently, the English landscaper Tim Rees, of Schoenach Rees in London, has been invited to take the garden in hand. With such a rich diversity already established, his first concern was to create a linking itinerary. He felt the gardens were like elements of a beautiful necklace, which needed a strong thread to link them. His solution takes full advantage of the differences of level at the site. Today the visitor first

THIS PAGE The eighteenth-century folly beside the swimming-pool is hidden from the house. Here, pots brim with white oleanders, pelargoniums and petunias



discovers the rose parterre from high above, and the potager after winding downhill through the wildflower meadow.

One of the estate's most challenging features has been this slope, planted with local wild flowers and garden perennials from all over the world. Tim Rees particularly likes *Aster x frikartii* 'Monch', the yellow, scabious-like *Cephalaria gigantea* and, a plant beloved of Graham Stuart Thomas, *Selinum tenuifolium*. Serge Pauleau, the head gardener, has added groups of a silvery-white, wild, local aster.

Tim Rees has also created one of Le Petit Fontanille's most successful features in the informal bank plantings which now encircle and link the aromatic border and the rose parterre. Ceanothus, lavenders and perovskias provide a long flowering season in cool blues and silvers after the roses have finished. Midsummer is always difficult in Provence, once the heat settles in. It is then, too, that visitors may best appreciate Rees' new 'green room', designed to make use of 158 spare yews. Anyone passing along its central path activates sprinklers that provide a Gothic arch of spray overhead. Only if the mistral is blowing, however, does the stroller get wet.

Le Petit Fontanille is a garden where humour is very much at home. Nowhere more perhaps, than in the names Anne has given to different parts of the garden. One of Peter Coats' plantings of perennials beside the lawn recalls Sissinghurst, and has become memorable as the 'Sizzles border'. This is a garden of sensual enjoyment, not only in its wealth of hues and fragrances but also in its flavours: fruit and vegetables, olive oil, honey and wine are all produced on the property. Vineyards stretch almost the whole length of the drive from the main road, on its east side. To the west, natural, wild scrubland has been only lightly tamed and guided, to bring out the *garrigue*'s inherent beauty.



Le Petit Fontanille is thus a secluded, autonomous haven. But, though it lacks the grand views which attract so many neo-Provençal gardeners, its horizons are still, in a sense, worldwide. It draws its designers and its plants from England, the Continent and the US.

At the same time, however, everything bears the personal touch of its owner – even the cherub's head fountain by the grotto, which portrays a recent grandchild. Though cosmopolitan, diverse and sophisticated, these gardens are also greatly enjoyed by friends and family, who share Anne's delight in their creation □