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Le Carnet de France: Les Beaux Jours Arrivent

By Martine Dulles

When one thinks of French gardens, the first ones to come to mind will probably be the Château de Versailles gardens designed by André Le Nôtre (1613-1700), the renowned gardener for Louis XIV. It is very formal and geometrical, totally opposite in style to the overflowing English gardens.

Well, since the 18th century, French gardens have changed dramatically, especially in the last three decades, during which there has been a resurgence of activity and creativity. In every corner of the country, numerous gardens of all sizes and shapes with different themes await your discovery. This summer, allow me to introduce you to some that are as special as they are different.

The first one is in Chaumont-sur-Loire, a small village along the Loire River, just east of Tours. The Château de Chaumont is perched up on the hill and was first built as a fortress during the tenth century to control the borders between the different nearby counties and to collect payments from boats carrying merchandise up and down the Loire.

During the Renaissance, wings and towers were added to the château and it was converted into a residence. Catherine de Medici (1519-1589), wife of King Henri II (1519-1559), bought it in 1550 and used it as a hunting lodge. After her husband's death, she asked the king's "favorite," Diane de Poitiers (1499-1566), to exchange Chaumont (a seigniorial castle) with the more imposing Château de Chenonceaux, a royal castle 16 miles to the south on the Cher River. At Chenonceaux there are two superb gardens, one created by Catherine and the other by Diane — just a little rivalry.

In 1750, a very successful businessman named Jacques-Donatien Le Ray (1726-1803) bought the château. Le Ray de Chaumont (as he became known) was a supporter of the American rebels during the Revolutionary War, acting as an intermediary between King Louis XVI and the American representatives, Benjamin Franklin, Arthur Lee and

Silas Deane. He even provided financial support to the American army with his own resources. Benjamin Franklin was a guest at the château.

Later, Le Ray's son, also called Jacques-Donatien Le Ray (1760-1840), went to the United States, married an American lady and became an American citizen.

In 1840, the then-famous architect from Blois, Jules Potier de la Morandière, restored the grand staircase and the drawbridge at the entrance and added two towers (interestingly, one of his descendants lives in Charleston). The château became classified as a "monument historique."

The French government began looking at historic buildings, châteaux, abbeys and other sites with historic or artistic significance in 1790. The first classification list was published in 1840. A major law and a program protecting these historic monuments was adopted in 1913 and has been updated many times since.

The last private owners of the Château de Chaumont were the Prince and Princess de Broglie, from 1875 to 1938. No expense was spared — it was a time of lavish entertainment. The Prince de Broglie hired Henri Duchêne (1841-1902), the most well-known landscape architect of the time to design the park as we see it today. The work lasted four years. He created an English-style garden, planting many trees separated from one another in such a way so not to block the views of the Loire. Those trees, including many cedar trees, most probably from Lebanon, are now full-grown and spectacular.

The park covers 80 acres and has since been recognized with the distinction of "jardin remarquable." This label is awarded by the French Ministry of Culture to gardens that display a botanical and historical interest, are well integrated in their sites and built with a sense of respect for the environment. They must also be open to the public for at least 50 days a year. The distinction is reviewed every five years and is now attributed to 462 gardens in France and the French West Indies ("*Lesplusbeauxjardinsdefrance.com*") is an excellent



IMAGE BY THE AUTHOR

An art creation made of flowers in one of the rooms of the Château for the International Garden Festival 2022.

site to discover these gardens.

In addition to visiting the park, the inside of the château with its historical rooms along with the chapel, the stables and other dependances, the *International Garden Festival* (initiated in 1992) draws thousands of visitors every year to the Château de Chaumont. Thirty artists selected from all over the world are invited to design a small garden incorporating a piece of art following the specific theme of the year and 900 small gardens have been created since. Some entries are ephemeral, but some major pieces have been retained at the Domaine. Among them you can see sculptures made by Sheila Hicks from Nebraska, John Grade from Minneapolis, Alison Stigora from Philadelphia and others.

This year, due to the change in climate, the theme is *Resilient Gardens*. "Resilience is about making a difficulty a strength. This is why designers from all over the world have been invited to reflect on the solutions to be implemented to foster nature's regenerative capacities," wrote Madame Chantal Colleu-Dumond, the director for the opening ceremony of the festival. This year the festival lasts from April 25 to November 5.

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