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MY FRENCH COUNTRY HOME

the magazine

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**A FLORAL MELODY
GARDENS & INTERIORS**

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Evolving With Time

Photos by Eric Sander - Text by Victor Santoni

Les Jardins du Château d'Ainay-le-Vieil in Central France are a masterpiece of sculptural parterre, romantic roses and expansive canals. Take a tour around one of France's more remarkable yet unsung gardens.

FRENCH COUNTRY

1. A small outbuilding on the grounds with roses climbing the walls epitomizes the garden's romantic style.
2. Topiary is a dominant feature and has taken decades of careful sculpting.

FLORAL BEAUTY
(OPPOSITE)

1. Visitors arrive at the château via a driveway lined with fragrant roses.
2. Many of the espalier fruit trees are found lining the garden walls.



From afar, Ainay-le-Vieil is a striking sight. Prominent during the Hundred Years' War between France and England, the château's structure remains an intimidating circle of ram-parts and towers.

Step inside, and a softer, more sophisticated aesthetic is revealed. Decorative wall carvings, rounded tiled roofing and Gothic spires show that it was designed as a place of both protection and elegant living.

The château lost its military importance when the war came to an end, and in 1467, Ainay-le-Vieil came into its next age under the ownership of Charles de Bigny, who transformed it into a pre-Renaissance gem.

Today, Ainay is in the care of Marie-Sol de La Tour d'Auvergne, a member of the third generation Bigny family. Her parents were the first to open the property to the public, and Marie-Sol, along with her siblings and their own

children, agreed that the castle and its grounds should remain both protected and shared.

In 1985, Marie-Sol was handed an opportunity for a fresh start when a violent storm ravaged the property. Toppled trees were scattered around the grounds, and many buildings suffered damages. The clean-up alone was a monumental task; it took two years for all the fallen trees to be removed.



LACE-LIKE DETAILS

1. The embroidered parterre of box bushes has box cones at the corners.
2. An aerial view of the *chartreuse* gardens shows the symmetrical design of each chamber.
3. A path leads through from one *chartreuse* to the next, the stone archways outlined by pale roses.

Although her treasured land now looked like a battlefield, Marie-Sol began to imagine the possibilities offered up by this blank canvas. It was serendipitous that she then met landscaper Pierre Joyaux, a man skilled in the formal gardening methods that Marie-Sol desired to bring to Ainay.

Their collaboration began with the rosarium, which was filled with antique French roses, most of which had to be sourced from England, plus other varieties to extend the blooming period beyond May and June. Among the additions was the Rose Colbert, created for Ainay by Georges Delbard, founder of the famed Delbard nursery.

Pierre was also involved in crafting Ainay's most eye-catching features: the *chartreuses*. The word has many meanings, but here it refers to open-air spaces: small, walled parks with distinct themes.

Located on the far west of the grounds, they are linked together by archways carved into the stone walls. These walls are tall enough to create different climates, which allow for a variety of plants and fruit to grow. This rare kind of architecture was inspired by the King's Vegetable Garden at Versailles.

The five individual *chartreuses* are spread over an acre. First is the Florist Garden. Inspired by the work of 19th-century English landscapers, it is a rectangular bed of perennial flowers, cleverly mixed so that it is always blooming and culminates in a breathtaking view through the archways that follow.





tion of topiary shapes and birds.

MY FRENCH COUNTRY HOME ■



PERFECT SYMMETRY

1. In the Sculpted Orchard, fruit espalier trees of varying heights give structure without overcrowding the overall design.
2. The fifth *chartreuse* with an embroidered parterre looks even better from above.

Second is the Sculpted Orchard, a collection of fruit trees that have been pruned and tied into varying shapes. Modeled on the fruit gardens at Versailles, the trees fan out over the path to create an almost covered alleyway that leads onto the third *chartreuse*, the Meditation Garden.

This is a place for peaceful reflection and appreciation of nature — illustrated by the medieval-style fresco of Saint Francis of Assisi that adorns one of the walls.

Next comes the Humble Cloister that features beautiful Renaissance stylings. Its trees are shaped for structure, their branches linking together to form arches that line the path. Many of the plants are medicinal or aromatic, a reminder of how they were once used. Visitors can find a unique flower here: the Loiret Cayeux iris.



The fifth and final *chartreuse* is the Embroidered Parterre, a fitting name when the garden is viewed from above. In homage to 17th-century French gardens, a carpet of boxwood sprawls across the park like embroidery. Blue wooden lattice borders the entire *chartreuse*, completing the stately aesthetic of this final garden.

With the property completely transformed, Marie-Sol's collaboration with Pierre ended in 1997. By then, the rosarium and *chartreuses* were gathering admirers, and the castle itself was also a draw. There was one more area that needed attention. Marie-Sol and her daughter, Alexandra, got to work on the soon-to-be *Grand Carré de l'Île* ("Great Square of the Island").

A MOMENT OF CALM

1. This lattice archway was created by one of the gardeners who was also trained in carpentry.
2. The fresco of Saint Francis of Assisi on the wall of the Meditation Garden was created in memory of Marie-Sol's late husband.





REFLECTIVE STATE

1. A stone bridge leads across the canal to the *Grand Carré de l'Île* ("Great Square of the Island").

2. An octagonal kiosk provides a place to sit and take in the calming water.

The canals were completely covered by overgrown plants and teeming with beavers when Marie-Sol and her daughter started work on the grounds. Upon discovering the hidden square — a typical feature of Renaissance gardens, once likely used as a vegetable garden or flower bed — they set out clearing and consolidating the canals so water could once again flow through the property, connecting its various features. Bordered by waterways measuring nearly 400 square feet, the island is home to a palisade of hornbeam trees that frames the small meadow, and tall, majestic topiaries grace the alleys.

As the heiress and caretaker of such a treasure, Marie-Sol is eager to share the beauty she's created with others. Going one step further than her parents, she now allows access to the château interior and will soon be opening a boutique



hotel on the grounds. Two Renaissance-style villas, the old servants' quarters and the farm are being converted into guesthouses, and half of the château rooms will accommodate guests.

No longer will the nine centuries-long history of Ainay be exclusive to her family, in its newest era, it will belong to all. 🌿

www.chateau-ainaylevieil.fr