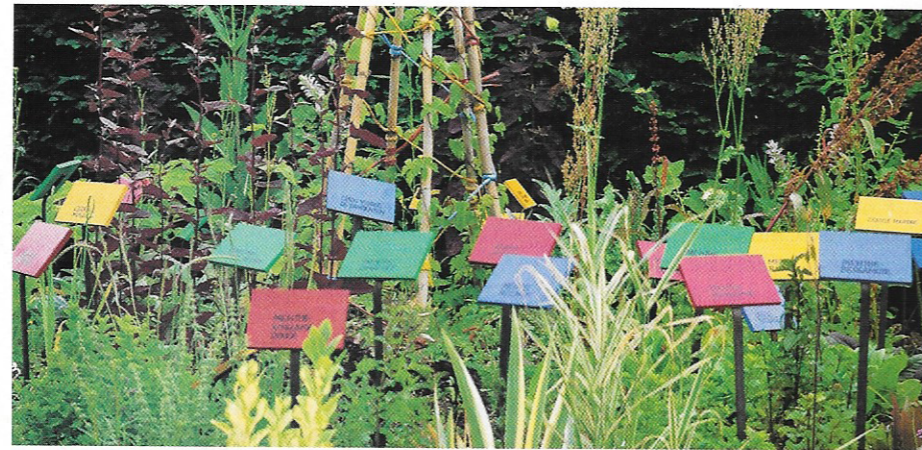


Vegetable extravaganza

PETER SHEARD

8th International Garden Festival, Chaumont-sur-Loire

Until 17 October. (Tel: 0033 254 209922. Easily accessible from Paris on the A10)



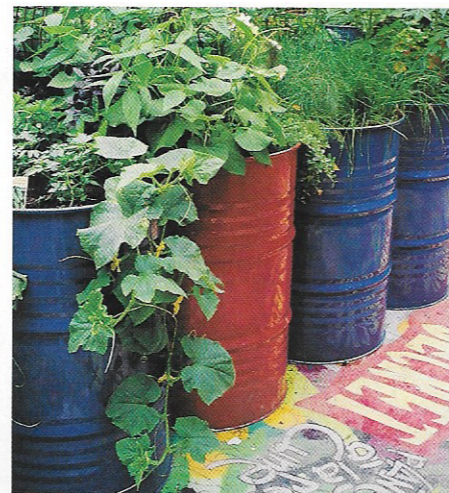
Colours of the south of France in the 'Bio Vegetable Garden'

In the late 1990s, Chelsea still rules supreme as the arbiter of good taste in garden design, but a pretender is abroad and it is French. The Festival at Chaumont, an exquisite chateau overlooking the River Loire, is now in its eighth year (AJ 19.9.96, 1.10.98). This time the theme is 'nothing but vegetables': an opportunity for designers from Scotland to Morocco, from Bangladesh to Japan, to demonstrate innovation and style and, above all, to have fun.

The grounds have been laid out since the first festival as a sequence of hedged garden rooms, offering a comforting sense of permanence. Within these rooms are 28 varied designs for festival visitors to examine. Chaumont does not exhibit the meticulous attention to detail that characterises Chelsea. Rather, it concentrates on the unusual and intelligent, the realistic and adaptable.

As an example, take Lionel Bouvier's 'Urban Vegetable Garden' – a reaction against the confines of city living but also an exhibition of its possibilities. Brightly coloured oil drums filled with beans, vines and lilies are juxtaposed against a floor resplendent with sprayed graffiti (all sponsored by local horticultural schools). Certainly some London balconies could benefit from this treatment.

One garden of note overflows with familiar icons – the shed, the vegetable patch, the well – which are wonderfully reinterpreted, with an entire hollowed-out tree refurbished as a stylish hut. Another, the

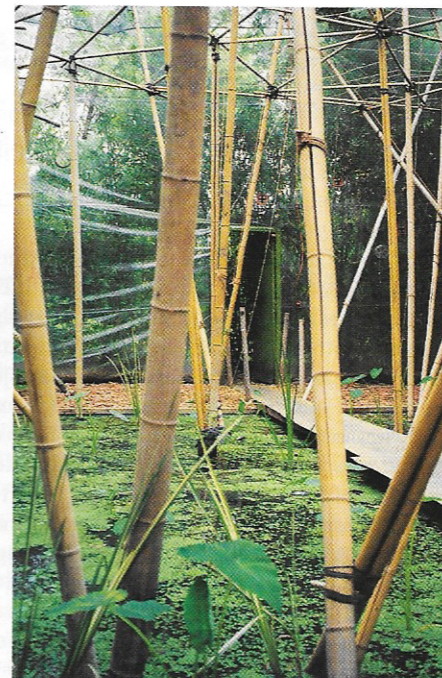


Lionel Bouvier's 'Urban Vegetable Garden'

'Gaspatio Andaluz', is inspired by the colours of Spain: with olive-oil containers supporting capsicums and peppers, it is illuminated by a huge white wall and sheltered by a blue one.

The energy and experimentation is impressive. René Pécgrère's African garden has swirling floor colours and native crops; elsewhere the floating gardens of Mexico and Burma are evoked, and also the techniques of hydroponics, with reed-rafts of vegetables, each representing a different recipe. The most humorous example is the 'Tartan Vegetable Garden', where violet cabbages, blue leeks and red sage intersect in a vegetal weaving of the Chaumont Clan.

There are buildings of interest too. Take,



Bamboo structure of the 'Soft Greenhouse'

for example, the 'Soft Greenhouse' of Edouard François and Duncan Lewis: a stunning array of bamboo supports and metal walkways around a pool spiked with exotic flowers, with a polythene 'greenhouse' giving shelter for pumpkins and marrows. The whole is enclosed in a secret bamboo garden, still and secluded. Patrick Nadeau and Associates' 'Nomadic Garden' displays a demountable four-sided box/greenhouse equipped with atomisers, water supply and a terrace for contemplation and rest. The Conran Shop would die for this structure.

So what of this French alternative to Chelsea? It is easy to say that Chelsea has become too commercial, too media-conscious, and that it is over-sponsored. Unfortunately, an hour at Chaumont proves this to be true. Chaumont's gardens cost about £10,000; Chelsea's are ten times that. The positive thing about Chaumont is that you can get ideas without thinking you have to have a second mortgage; people really look at the details here and have more than a week to do so. Chaumont's idea of 'theme' is challenging to its designers and they don't have to be assigned to a national newspaper.

Chelsea is a true glory for its beauty and audacity but, as a piece of horticultural realism, it lost its way a long time ago. Chaumont, by contrast, has simplicity and honesty on its side. Any trip to the Loire this summer should include a visit to these gardens.

Peter Sheard is a landscape architect and associate of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill