

## Valloires gardens: Immaculate conception

John Graham-Hart

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John Graham-Hart is dazzled by the monastery garden of Valloires in Picardy where Gallic horticultural genius is given its head.

The border guard is approaching the car. "Passport." He glances at my picture, bends down and stares into my evasive eyes. An aeon passes. OK. I'm guilty. I know it. He knows it. Let's just get it over with. "...'ave a nice day, m'sieur." And suddenly, wonderfully, I'm free. I withdraw a small glass phial and there they are, warmish but safe – my 60 French baby ladybirds. My garden in Kent looks like a set from Day of the Aphids and I'm hoping these insects will do the trick.



Immaculate lawns and sculpted privet sweep down to a rose garden beneath the abbey walls

Not, of course, that Vincent Delaitre the director of the gardens at the glorious Abbaye de Valloires, and my ladybird supplier, is by nature a conspirator. None the less, he is a man with a mission. "This is a beautiful garden but it's so much more than that," he says, as we stroll across a dewy lawn towards the English Garden. "I want this to be a place where people are inspired. A place where they realise what could be possible in their own gardens. I want us to grow ideas."

The Abbaye de Valloires is the only example of a complete 18th-century Cistercian abbey in France. The "white monks" first built an abbey here in the 12th century but it was laid waste first by the Hundred Years War and then the Thirty Years War. It was rebuilt between 1741 and 1756 and the call to matins was again heard through the lovely village of Argoules. Alas, its pastoral idyll was rudely interrupted by the Revolution and the abbey was shut down in 1791.

After various adventures, including almost being dismantled stone by stone and shipped off to America, it was taken over by a First World War Red Cross nurse, Thérèse Papillon, who created the Association de Valloires, dedicated to restoring the abbey and the running of a children's home which still uses one wing of the building. The gardens, on the other hand, had long since returned to the wild, but 20 years ago they were discovered by Jean-Louis Cousin, a nursery owner in the Pas-de-Calais who was looking for a site for a botanical park and a new home for his impressive collection of shrubs.

Cousin called in Gilles Clément, now one of the best-known landscape architects in Europe, who outraged the traditionalists by coming up with a radical contemporary design that not only included a formal French garden but a great deal else besides.

With the abbey as a backdrop, the setting for the French Garden is pure theatre. Immaculate lawns and sculpted privet sweep down to a rose garden beneath the abbey walls. To the south is the English Garden, an informal labyrinth of "islands" with no paths around them, just lawn. There's "soft thorn island" for prickly shrubs, "winter island" for trees with red, green, pink or white bark, "silver island", "golden island" and "purple island" for plants with decorative foliage, and numerous others.

In the Garden of the Five Senses, designed by parfumeur Jean François Laporte, the plants are presented according to the senses of touch, sight, hearing, taste and smell and you can try the

fruits growing there.

One of the most fascinating area is the Evolution Garden based around the work of naturalist and early evolutionist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck. At one end are primitive mosses and ferns which flourished 400 million years ago, and as you walk up the garden you pass down the ages to the first flowering plants, such as the magnolia, and so to today's arrivistes.

Presiding over all is, of course, the abbey itself. Facing the gardens is the beautiful east façade, complete with a 250-year-old pear tree, the fruit of which once went to make the monks' pear liqueur. Music still plays an important role in the life of the abbey, with a major festival staged each summer and a selection of rooms and suites with views over the garden have been renovated and are available to visitors. There's no restaurant but Argoules, a minute's drive away, has a good selection.

Postscript: racked with guilt on my return, I ring Defra and discover that there is no restriction on the importation of ladybirds as they already exist here. They originated in Japan, apparently. Now that would have been a good smuggling story...

- Les Jardins de Valloires (0033 03 22 23 53 55; [www.jardinsdevalloires.com](http://www.jardinsdevalloires.com)). Open March 10-November 11, 10am to 6pm; admission, adults €7.50 (£6); children €4.50 (£3.60).
- The Abbaye (03 22 29 62 33; [www.abbaye-valloires.com](http://www.abbaye-valloires.com)). Open April 1-November 12; admission, adults €6.50 (£5), children €4 (£3); suites from around €90 (£72) a night, based on two sharing, and doubles from €55-€80 (£44-£64).
- The Festival de Valloires takes place this year on 8-13 August; admission prices and further details at [www.festival-valloires.com](http://www.festival-valloires.com).

Story from Telegraph Travel:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/europe/france/2123300/Valloires-gardens-Immaculate-conception.html>

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