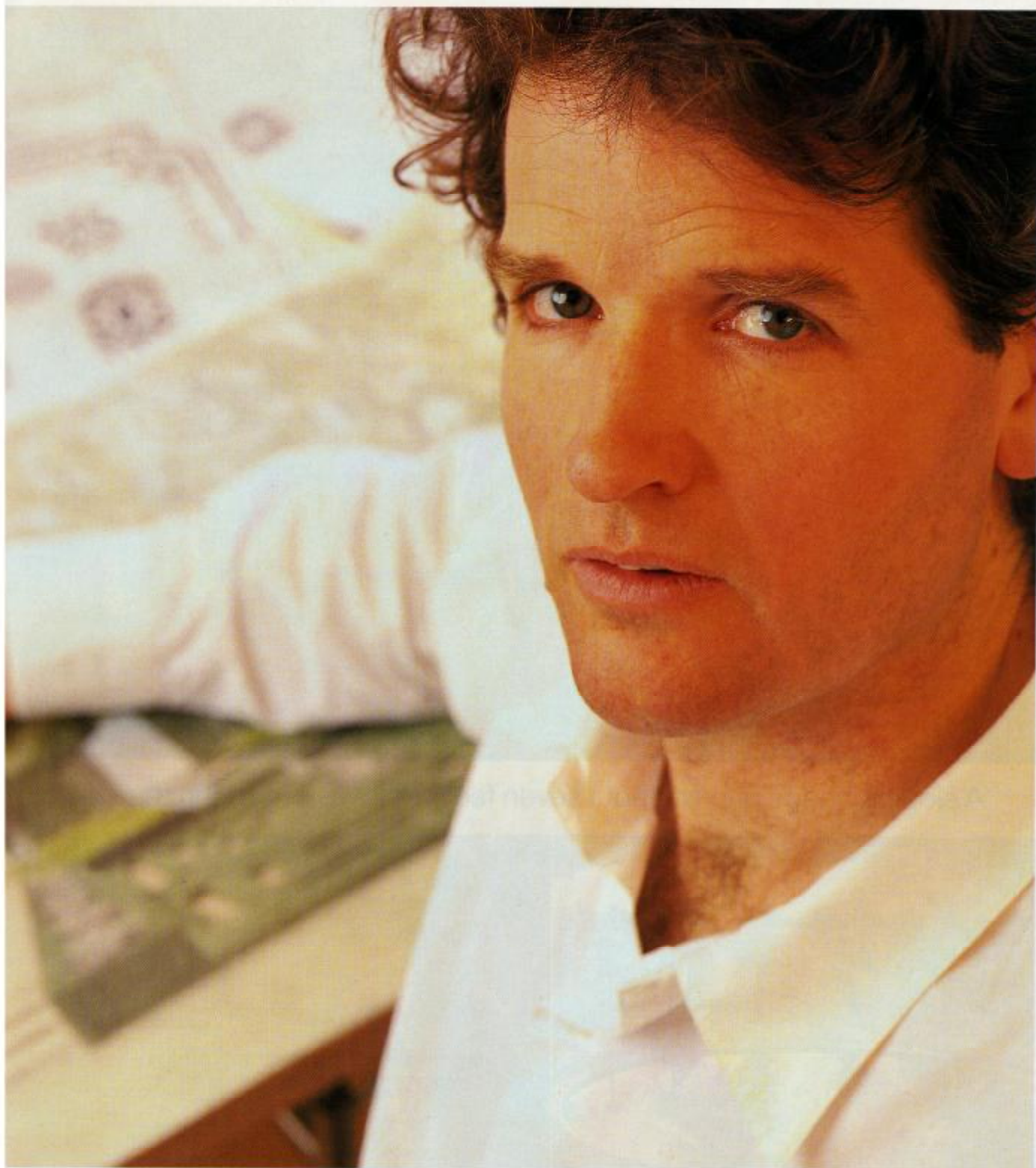


VERSAILLES, SW3

André le Nôtre, Louis XIV's greatest gardener, is the inspiration behind a magnificent formal garden at the Chelsea Flower Show this month. Sponsored by Laurent-Perrier and *Harpers & Queen*, the Garden History Society's 'Homage to Le Nôtre' marks the 300th anniversary of his death in full foliage. *Caroline Clifton-Mogg* does some spadework



Tree kings Left: The Laurent-Perrier/*H&Q* garden (in association with Merrill Lynch) includes a grid of 40 bay trees. Opposite: garden designer, Tom Stuart-Smith. 'What I wanted to do was something which emphasised Le Nôtre's modernity, and the way that, within his immense attention to detail, he was a master of understatement'



André le Nôtre, garden designer *extraordinaire* to the Sun King, Louis XIV, was one of the most influential figures of his age. His schemes – at Versailles and elsewhere – were huge; his attention to detail was enormous; and his ideas were revered across Europe for many years after his death in 1700.

In England, these ideas gave rise to a huge number of what we now call 'baroque' or 'formal' gardens (including those at Blair Atholl in Scotland and Wentworth Woodhouse in Yorkshire). These were gardens of wood and water laid out

in geometrical patterns, crammed with elaborate parterres, labyrinths, 'goose feet', and *cabinets de verdure*. Only in the mid-eighteenth-century, when William Kent 'leaped the fence and saw that all Nature was a garden', did the fashion for wilder landscapes usher in what is now considered the typical English garden.

If Le Nôtre's influence in France owed much to Louis XIV's longevity (he reigned for 72 years, allowing his favourite designer to work on project after project), in England it was spread principally by a book. When Dézallier d'Argeville's *La*

Théorie et la Pratique du Jardinage, showing Le Nôtre's designs, was translated into English in 1712, it became – by the standards of the day – a bestseller, attracting 243 subscribers. Among the illustrations is a wonderful spiral labyrinth by one of Le Nôtre's pupils, which was copied both at Wentworth Woodhouse in Yorkshire and at Cholmondeley Hall (now Castle) in Cheshire – an early example of *entente cordiale*. It is this that forms the basis of the Laurent-Perrier/Harpers & Queen garden in association with Merrill Lynch.

‘Two other things were important. One was to achieve a sense of space in a confined area: it needed a very simple central vista – something that reflected light. So at the far end we have made a sloping hedge of box, about seven feet high, with a mirror in the middle that will reflect the sky – fluffy white clouds, we hope, rather than raindrops – to introduce the idea of infinity. The other important thing was repetition, which I represented with a grid of 40 bay trees, each seven to eight feet high.’



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The project got underway when designer Tom Stuart-Smith was approached by the Garden History Society, an organisation dedicated to the study and preservation of historic gardens which also offers advice on restoration and conservation. The society itself had been consulted by the Historic Royal Palaces, who had been contacted by the Etablissement de Versailles about the possibility of marking the tercentenary of Le Nôtre's death. The society suggested a garden at the Chelsea Flower Show.

Tom Stuart-Smith was pleased, if apprehensive. ‘I had some reservations, because of course Le Nôtre worked on such a vast scale, which could be difficult to transfer to such a small space. Also, there might be historical problems – it's only too easy to lapse into parody. What I wanted to do was something that emphasised Le Nôtre's modernity and the way that, within his immense attention to detail, he was a master of understatement; and something that wasn't obviously seventeenth or eighteenth-century, but which had elements of each and which was also symbolic.’

Tim Rock, co-ordinator for the Garden History Society, suggested a garden based on the spiral labyrinth. ‘It was scale I saw as the main problem,’ says Stuart-Smith: ‘You're changing from acres to metres, so of course the labyrinth becomes almost a parterre.’

The garden, which can be seen from two sides, is in two halves. The front is dominated by the labyrinth, which is made from raised box hedges (consisting of between eight and nine thousand plants) and punctuated by water jets buried inside the hedges. Beyond this is a tranquil central canal with, on either side, a *parterre anglais* – the type which the French so envied, with lawns scattered with buttercups and jonquils. The effect is of a medieval *mille-fleurs* tapestry.

At the end of a path are two six foot-high stone tablets, sculpted by Martin Jennings, each bearing a contemporary quotation about Le Nôtre. ‘They represent the only true eighteenth-century element,’ explains Tom Stuart-Smith. ‘Other than that, there is no other ornament.’

Even in Le Nôtre's time there was a regular horticultural cross-passage between England and France. England was full of French gardeners laying out wonderful formal gardens, while France saw many English gardeners working to create bowling greens or *boulingrins*. It is therefore wholly appropriate that Le Nôtre should be commemorated with an English garden based on French principles. □

The Chelsea Flower Show at the Royal Hospital Chelsea, London SW3, runs from 23 to 26 May; see page 161 for our special ticket offer. For information about The Garden History Society, ring 020 7608 2409.