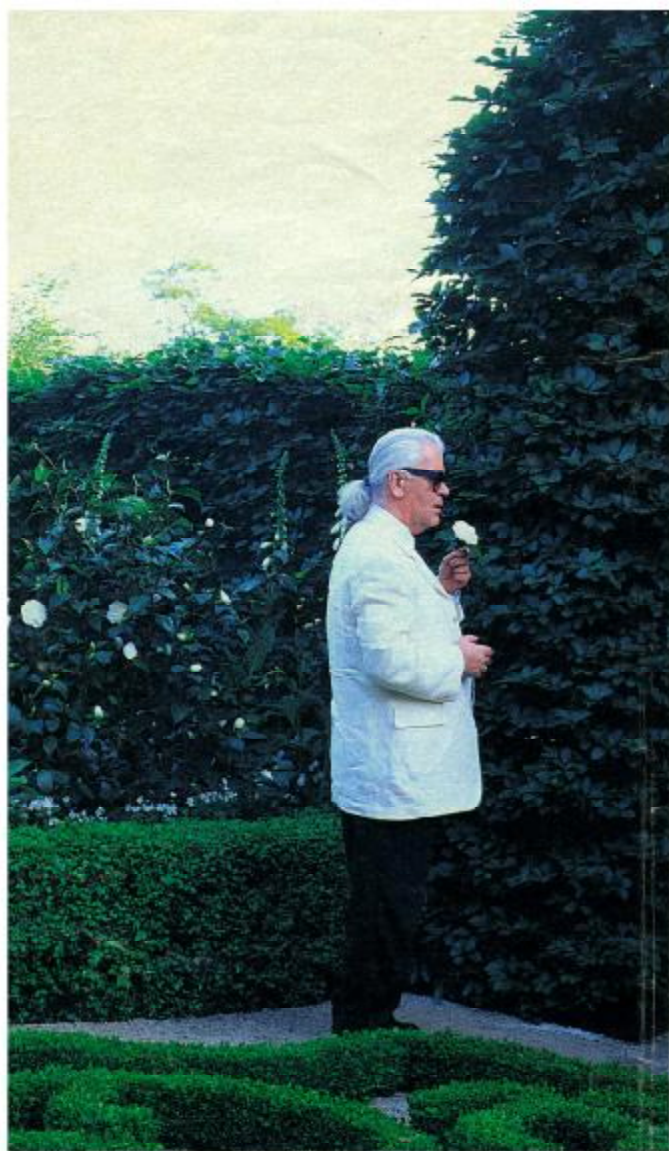




# Come into the garden, Karl

Karl Lagerfeld's creation for Chanel at the Chelsea Flower Show has revitalised the art of fantasy in garden design  
By June Ducas. Photographs by Melanie Eclare



Clockwise from left, Lagerfeld with a camellia; an iris 'White City' and an aquilegia 'White Star' – 'I wanted to capture the essence of a baroque garden such as the one at Versailles'

**W**HEN IT was announced that Karl Lagerfeld, head of design at Chanel, had booked a corner site for a garden at the Chelsea Flower Show, you could have been forgiven for thinking that the wheel was being reinvented. The hype! The fuss! It took goodness knows how many pages of fashion magazines to launch it, as well as two dinners attended by glossy magazine editors, whose relationship with the oil is just about as distant as it can be.

The hyperbole had history on its side. Anyone who has seen the great gardens of France will know that when it comes to the art of making formal ones, Gallic style eclipses the world. 'Whereas the English garden is often naturalistic, springing out of the landscape,' said Lagerfeld, 'a jardin à la Française is an artificial conceit dreamt up by its creator where man holds sway over unruly Nature.'

Lagerfeld is not a man to take any nonsense from capricious Mother Nature. Some years ago the Queen Mother visited him for tea at his house in Brittany at a season when, sadly, the roses were over. Undeterred, he ordered thousands of Piaget roses, which were pinned by hand to an avenue of orange trees for her delectation. Nor in commissioning the Chelsea garden was he deterred by

the fact that Mademoiselle Chanel was never known to own a garden herself – there's not a lot of lawn between the Rue Cambon and the Ritz, where she spent most of her life.

So Lagerfeld's Bosquet de Chanel was an imaginary garden – one that Coco might have visualised herself. 'Since I am passionate about the 17th and 18th century, when French culture was at its zenith, I wanted to capture the essence of a baroque garden – such as Louis XIV made at Versailles,' he said. 'What I love about the genre is its strong architectural framework, the strict geometric lines interwoven with decorative scrolls and ornament, the vistas and cabinets de verdure – a succession of green enclaves that resemble an enfilade of rooms.' Such enclaves were intended as scenes for a fete, or a theatrical event.

Lagerfeld's concept of a green and white bosquet, as realised by Tom Stuart-Smith, was enclosed by 8ft hedges and arches of double the height in beech. It was a small private universe. The garden axis focused on a gilded statue of the Venus de Medici, standing half-shaded, in a semi-circular arbour. Box hedges edged the wide borders, overflowing with white flowers; aquilegia, verbascum, feathery lilacs, tulips, clumps of foxgloves with irises through them, and Coco Chanel's favourite flower, camellias. 'I chose flowers that have natural

grace – native plants like lily of the valley that might have seeded themselves from the wood outside,' said Stuart-Smith. He gave a blowsy English flourish to the borders, but never at the expense of the overall French principles.

According to Lagerfeld, who has a collection of early oil paintings and engravings documenting the most famous baroque gardens, it is a myth that they were devoid of flowers. Indeed, he says that Madame de Pompadour adored them. She even had white porcelain flowers made at Vincennes for her garden at the Chateau de Bellevue. 'At our first meeting, Karl showed me his gallery of pictures which were inspirational,' said Stuart-Smith. 'Although the garden is a fantasy rather than a historic pastiche.'

Realising this fancy had been no easy task. 'My hair stood on end at the thought of camellias in May,' he said. 'They are notoriously touchy and normally flower in April.' Since before Christmas, he watched over them. They had to be perfect. For Chanel, the camellia is key. During Lagerfeld's reign at the fashion house they have been on everything from belts to buttons – even once embroidered in pole position on some minimal bikinis. Taken to Chelsea, wrapped in polystyrene, each plant had a small umbrella to stop petals turning brown.

Well over 18 months ago, Stuart-Smith started to scour the continental nurseries for mature beeches – trees with shining leaves to highlight the bosquet's contours. The ones he found in Germany are 20 years old. 'They had to be planted here by last March if they were to be in full leaf for Chelsea,' he said. 'This spring they had to be forced under glass.'

At the same time, the 1,700 box plants for the parterre were shipped here and clipped before they burst into growth. Using a giant wooden template, it was laid out in an elaborate pattern, configured on Chanel's cipher and the outline of Madonna lilies, chosen for the sake of their sinuous shape. Overall the garden was like a showy piece of couture embroidery, yet masterfully controlled. 'Symmetry is the most important factor in French gardens,' said Lagerfeld. 'It was an obsession of Louis XIV. His mistress once said, "Vous me faites mourir en symétrie [Your symmetry will be the death of me]." Actually, she was talking about the draughts created by the amount of doors he insisted on having to balance a room. Nevertheless, everywhere, he commanded harmony and uniformity.'

Stuart-Smith managed to encapsulate many of these Gallic elements in his garden. At first, the bosquet appeared simple, yet it was full of subtle details including topiary cones punctuating the borders.

However, Mother Nature has had the last word. When Waterers Landscape was building the garden, blackbirds nested in the trees. On closing day at Chelsea, gardeners found eggs there which they hadn't the heart to move and left to hatch. So the foreign buyer – rumoured to be agog at the Chanel box of garden wizardry – had to wait three weeks for delivery or, as Waterers' Mark Fane said, 'Until the fledging blackbirds fly.' ■

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