

# The Economist

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▶ tinal gardens looked down on nature from above, from a terrace or a balustrade, and controlled nature with enclosed gardens, topiary and canals, the British garden became about moving through nature, about experiencing it rather than just looking at it.

Walking through a garden circuit, such as the great landscapes of Stourhead or Stowe, became like walking through a series of classical landscape paintings by Poussin and Claude. Such gardens, planted by the aristocracy, were designed to demonstrate British informality as opposed to continental artifice. They were meant to display the culture of their owners, influenced by Addison's advice: "Make a landscape of your possessions."

Today, the enthusiasm for gardening encompasses every sector of society. In cities such as Birmingham, so-called Coriander Clubs have sprung up, where Asian women plant their native herbs and spices on disused land and African nurseries grow exotic tropical plants that were once unseen on British shores. Ms Uglow chuckles at a man in Norwich who blankets his banana plants in bubble wrap each winter to guard against the cold—he is not so different from the pineapple pioneers of the 17th century.

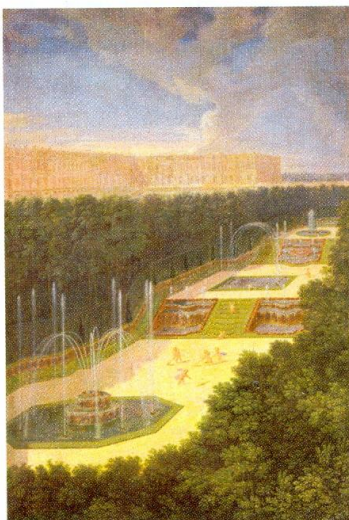
There is still snobbery, with people being judged by the contents of their trolley at garden centres. But gardening now, as in Shakespeare's time, is a language that everyone in Britain understands. It will change with fashion and technology, concludes Ms Uglow, but in important ways it will remain the same: "We may think that we are tending our garden, but of course, in many different ways, it is the garden and the plants that are nurturing us." ■

#### The gardens of Versailles

## A grovy kind of place

#### More bits restored with American help

ON JUNE 12th, one of the 15 ornamental groves in the gardens of Versailles will be officially reopened after ten years of reconstruction. It marks the latest in a series of American gifts to restore the great creation for Louis XIV of André Le Nôtre and Charles Le Brun. After the second world war John D. Rockefeller gave millions to restore the place, convinced that the chateau and its gardens were of wider than French significance. Americans then responded generously to storm damage in the 1990s, and now the American Friends of Versailles have given \$4m and years of voluntary work to help French experts re-



A sight for all eyes

create the *Bosquet des Trois Fontaines* (the Three Fountains Grove—see above).

Among the chief glories of Le Nôtre's vision, the ornamental groves were intimate spaces. Concealed from view by façades of trellised hornbeam surrounding thick copses of lime or chestnut, their sculptured terraces and fountains were intended to be discovered one by one like successive scene changes in a baroque opera. The design of the Three Fountains Grove was reputed to bear the imprint of the king's own hand.

Gardening can be an expensive pastime. Le Nôtre and Le Brun got through 1.5m "livres" (over \$250m at today's prices) in the first two years after they began laying out the park at Versailles in 1661. Trees take longer than stone walls to reach maturity, so the first groves and parterres were planted before work began on the palace itself. Created as the backdrop to spectacular royal entertainments, the park was seen from the start as theatrical decor. Passages of hornbeam flanked the main alleys to allow servants to pass to and fro without intruding on the spectacle.

For four decades Le Nôtre hardly paused for breath, draining marshes, extending perspectives, planting, shaping, cutting down and replanting, as the king's fancy and changing tastes dictated. As many as 36,000 gardeners and earth-shifters toiled to meet the royal deadlines. By the time of Le Nôtre's death (in 1700) domestic plumbing was still unknown to the townsfolk outside the walls, but the Versailles gardens boasted more ornamental fountains than any place on earth. To supply the huge reservoirs, miles of aqueduct were constructed and rivers were diverted by fantastic pumping projects dreamed up by top military engineers.

Pierre-André Lablaude, chief architect of historical monuments and author of a comprehensive book on the gardens of Versailles, pieced together the authentic condition of the grove in the late 17th century from visual references and written accounts of the day. His team had to revive forgotten construction techniques and find obsolete materials. A disused stone quarry, the indispensable source of a rare configuration of sandstone swirls, had to be restored to working order. When digging began, the remains of terraces and structures destroyed by centuries of neglect and the ravages of war were found buried under dense undergrowth.

While Mr Lablaude's team turns its attention to other jewels among the groves, the American Friends of Versailles are planning to provide transport for the disabled as their next act of philanthropy. This is particularly appropriate. For the Sun King continued to show off his treasures from a wheeled perambulator when he was incapacitated by gout late in his 72-year reign. (Part of a pitted marble ramp to help him get around was uncovered in the recent restoration.) And the gardens and palace of Versailles were always intended to be freely accessible to all the sovereign's subjects, on condition only that gentlemen wore their swords. ■

#### D-Day landings

## The long shadow

*L'Américain*. By Franz-Olivier Giesbert. Gallimard; 174 pages; €15.50

FRANZ-OLIVIER GIESBERT is a French novelist, biographer, television presenter and newspaper editor: in other words, an average French "intellectual". Except that, as he reveals in this arresting book, he and his mother were violently beaten throughout his childhood by a tormented father, a former American GI who never recovered from the anguish of having lived through D-Day. The book is a bestseller in France, one of a crop of books confessing to dark relationships with members of an author's family. There are no plans as yet to publish it in English.

The author's father, Frederick Giesbert, was the son of a German immigrant to America who taught painting at the Art Institute of Chicago. He was brought up in a comfortable, educated world, in an intellectual circle which included Saul Bellow and that was centred on the University of Chicago. The family had a second home on the shores of Lake Michigan.

At the age of 20, assigned to the American army's 29th division, Frederick landed ▶▶