

Provence

FRANCE



This view from the steps into the Les Terrasses du Chateau de Lauris shows the Durance River Valley and mountains to the north.

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Our trip to the Luberon in Provence, France, has left my husband and me planning a return. We want to revisit the area we experienced and explore further. The area is east of Cavaillon and we stayed in a charming bastide (village) with a view of Mont Sainte-Victoire that was our base for four days. Near the villages of Lauris and Puyvert, the bed-and-breakfast, surrounded by vineyards, olive and cherry trees, and close to a bike trail, met all our needs.

We had not searched out gardens prior to the trip but had no difficulty finding villages and gardens to see once we arrived. The best guide we used is the *Michelin Green Guide: Provence*, and we found many brochures once we arrived.



We visited four gardens, all with the designation Jardin Remarquable by the French Ministry of Culture. Two are in Lauris, both on terraces built into a hill. Les Terrasses du Chateau de Lauris, a formal garden on the first terrace, leads to the Conservatoire des plantes tinctoriales (Conservatory Botanical Garden of Dye-producing Plants) below. From the formal upper terrace, the view of the Durance valley and mountains to the north wraps around the 18th-century chateau. Known as the White Garden due to its white blooms in spring, the greens of the foliage in the parterres and the pollarded trees impress in the summer. The garden of dye plants holds 300 species of plants from around the world. The garden, divided into beds by the color produced by the plants, includes shade plants and structures as needed to create the conditions for each group of plants. Labels and signs indicate the dye made from the

plants, as flower color is not always the best indicator. Volunteers care for the garden. These two gardens were close to where we stayed.

Two more gardens required driving farther and getting lost, although GPS helped when we had a connection. We also found local maps at tourist offices helpful. We picked up a small announcement of an artist's garden in Eguilles, and our guide helped us find the town. We traveled across the Durance River and found our way to this village. When we arrived at the artist's home/garden/studio, it was closed. Calling the phone numbers did not help, so we explored the village and ate our picnic lunch. Returning to the gallery and after ringing the bell again, an elderly ➡➡

This view from above shows the design of the Conservatory Botanical Garden of Dye-producing Plants.

“ The backyard is a phenomenal garden of plants and sculptures that mimic one another. ”

Art imitates plant life in the garden of Max Sauze. Stone, iron, paper, and plants form a tableau in the garden.



man came to the door, the artist Max Sauze. We paid the entry fee. The front room of his house is a gallery of small works of paper and iron. We then walked through his home to the back yard where he left us to explore a phenomenal garden of plants and sculptures that mimic one another. A genteel older woman came out and offered to put our bags inside. She spoke about the work of the artist. Many of the pieces were constructed of hundreds or thousands of sheets of paper from small books, pierced through with metal stakes. The website is www.max-sauze.com.

We drove back east through the town of Pertuis and then far off the road to visit the gardens at Chateau Val Joanis. Situated on the site of an ancient Roman villa, the chateau originally was the property of Jean de Joanis, secretary to King Louis III of Naples. In 1978 designer Tobie Loup de Viane developed a garden similar to those that existed in the 18th ➡



century. It is ornamental and practical, producing fruits and vegetables. A vineyard was planted and there are now wine tastings and sales on-site. The day we arrived preparations were underway for a wedding, but we were able to wander as we wished through the gardens. Hedges of Box, Yew, Ilex, and Cedars created strong, dark backgrounds for vegetables, fruit (some espaliered), and ornamentals. Terraces, steps, and ironwork add to the 18th-century theme. The sun was hot and accentuated the contrast between the lush plantings with their arid environment.

The diversity of the gardens we visited, their unlikely locations, and the sense of place created by the choice of materials kept us thinking and talking about them long after we had left. 🍷



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The rich layering of the garden of the Chateau Val Joanis incorporates ornamental and food- and fruit-producing plants (above).

Strong structure from hedges and tall conifers provide a framework for perennials, grasses, fruits, and vegetables (left).