

THE GARDENS OF VERSAILLES

STORY AND PICS: SANDHYA SUNIL MAILDM

Sandhya is a landscape designer with her consultancy Earth Matters Consulting. The design practice provides design and installation services for residential, commercial and institutional projects. Sandhya also participates in Sydney garden shows, notably the Rivendell Flower and Garden Show. www.earthmattersconsulting.com.au



With a travel embargo in place, for me it was either plan the next trip without knowing when that could happen, or reminisce about ones taken – or both. Here I will do some reminiscing and share with you my visit to the celebrated French estate of Versailles during the winter of 2018.

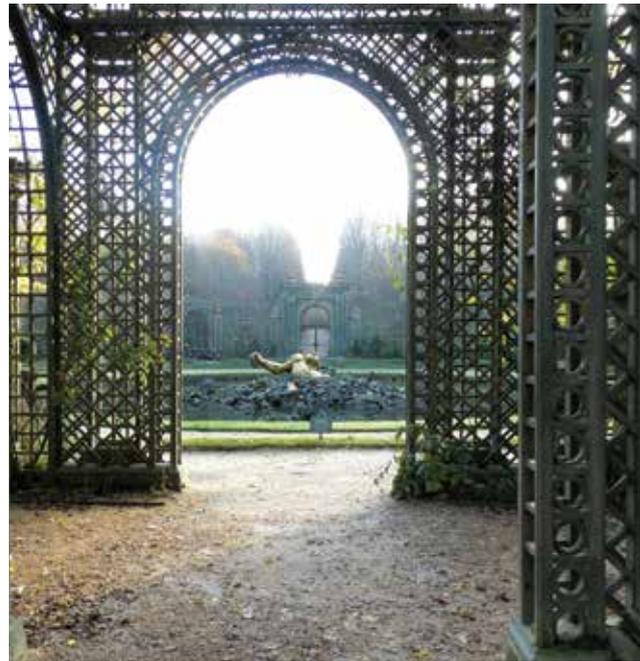
With only half a day set aside for Versailles, I decided to concentrate my time on the gardens.

ABOVE

At the intersection of the grid of the allées are four fountains symbolising each season: this is the Flora fountain - Spring - with the goddess Flora on a bed of roses, anemones, blueberries and heliotropes.

With the gates to the gardens opening at 8:00 am I could get an early start on a self-guided tour – the palace opens later and would have taken much longer. To hit the ground running, I had already downloaded the Palace of Versailles App to use as an online guide for explaining details of the gardens. It was really useful, with the interactive map being especially handy.

It took 50 years for Louis XIV, King of France and known as Louis the Great or The →



Sun King, to transform what was the hunting lodge and modest garden of Louis XIII into the renowned grand palace and gardens. Louis XIV, passionate about gardens, was sure that investing in the landscaping of the gardens would enhance the prestige and glory of his monarchy. He brought in landscape architect and gardener André Le Nôtre who wrought magic and turned marshes, swamps and woods of Versailles into the 'finest garden in Europe'.

Le Nôtre collaborated with project manager Jean-Baptiste Colbert, painter Charles Le Brun who designed most of the statues and fountains, and architect Jules Hardouin-Mansart. Each project was reviewed by the King himself, who was keen to see every detail.

Meadows and marshes covered the site before work on Le Nôtre's design began,

ABOVE LEFT TO RIGHT

The Ballroom Grove, originally intended for dancing; The Enceladus Grove was greatly modified in the early 1700s but has now been restored to its original design.

meaning huge earth-moving exercises were needed to level the ground for creating the parterres, and to dig for the canal and fountains. Trees from different regions of France were brought in. Originally, it was primarily the Linden tree (*Tilia cordata*) and Chestnut tree from the forests of France that were used. Subsequently, many exotic trees from further afield have been introduced, such as *Liriodendron tulipifera*, *Juniperus virginiana*, *Sequoiadendron giganteum*, and *Sophora japonica* to name just a few. There is variety in the arboreal heritage, rather than a mono-culture, to help manage and reduce tree loss from disease.

The Gardens of Versailles spreads over 800 hectares, and has 200,000 trees, 400 sculptures, 1,400 fountains and around 210,000 flowers are planted annually. A masterpiece of optical illusions

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and horticultural finesse, the Gardens can be classified to comprise of Groves, Fountains, Sculptures, Walks, Parterres, and the Orangery.

Groves

The groves are small gardens enclosed by trellises or tall hedges. They have paths leading to their gates, each of them themed differently and embellished with fountains, vases and statues. They were included to bring an element of surprise and fantasy to the Gardens, and served as settings for royal entertainment.

Fountains

Water was scarce, especially in the quantity required to fill the canal, the fountains and the parterres - not to mention irrigation. The Sun King commissioned an incredible engineering feat that incorporated the famous Marly Machine – a pump with hydraulic system of aqueducts and paddle wheels that pumped water from the river Seine, rising 150 metres.

The grandest of the fountains is Apollo's Fountain. Located in the west, it features the Greek sun god Apollo and his chariot lit by the morning sun, giving rise to the saying "the sun rises in the west at Versailles" (1668-1670). The sun god was the emblem of Louis the XIV, aka The Sun King.

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Sculptures

The sculptures are placed around the fountains, in the groves, along the walks and spread through the gardens. They are in bronze, marble and gilded lead and with so many of them it is purported to be the largest outdoor sculpture museum in the world. Largely, the sculptures appear to be influenced by Roman art, and subsequently 'Versailles' helped the French school of sculpture reach its pinnacle.

Walks

Le Nôtre used the north-south and east-west axes as his guiding principles in the Gardens. The Royal Way is on the main axis running east-west, sloping down to the Grand Canal. →

BELOW

The Latona Parterre is patterned with lawn, restored to this original form in 2015 after centuries of modifications including the use flower beds.



“ On the north-south axis and facing south, the Orangery is a massive structure – its central gallery is more than 150 metres long with a 13-metre-high vaulted ceiling. ”

At 300 metres long and 45 metres wide, with the Great Lawn in the centre, it is impressive to look at and walk along to appreciate the perspective view as the Grand Canal seems to rise up and flatten out. Sculptures adorn the sides of the walk, backed by rows of chestnut, yew and hornbeam trees.

The Water Walk is on the north-south axis, with the Neptune Fountain at the northern end. Small fountains bedecked with bronze marmouset sculptures line the Walk which traverses the Water Parterre and ends at the Orangery.

BELOW LEFT TO RIGHT

The Saturn Fountain symbolising winter; Apollo's Fountain with Apollo riding his chariot and two of the horses.

OPPOSITE TOP TO BOTTOM

Loiret, one of the Water Parterre sculptures that represent tributaries of the Loire River; The Orangery Parterre viewed from the terrace above.

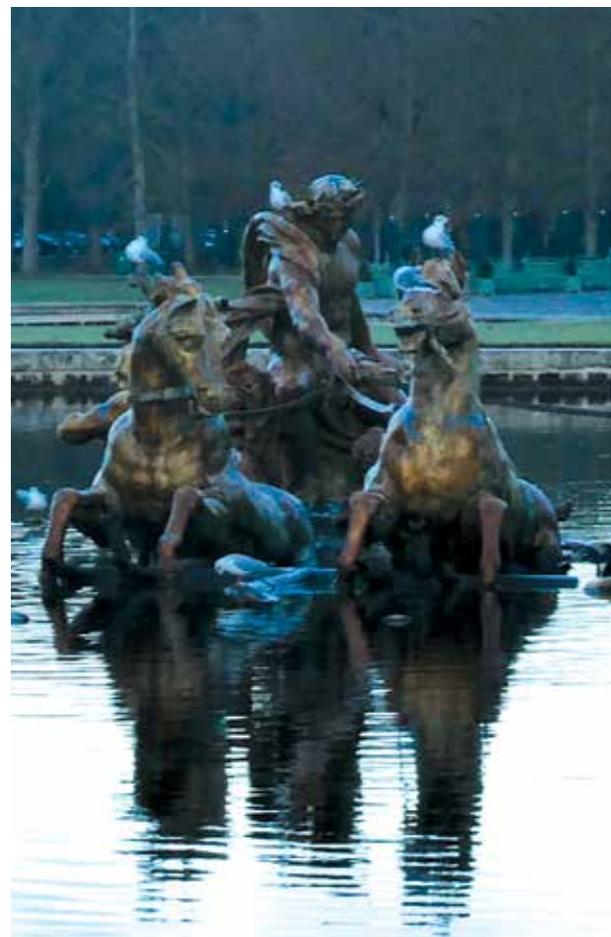
Parterres

Parterre is a geometric, symmetrically patterned arrangement of garden beds that can take on very intricate forms – somewhat like an embroidery. It is very specific to French gardens. At Versailles the current parterres are lawns bordered by hedging plants in intricate patterns, while the original style had lawn outlines directly etched into gravel.

As parterres are best seen from above, the principle ones at Versailles are designed to be viewed this way. The Latona Parterre in the heart of the Gardens is situated in a large sunken space of 3.5 hectares. The Orangery Parterre is also sunken, viewed from the terrace above, and the North and South Parterres, and the unusual Water Parterre, are designed to be viewed from the palace.

The Orangery

Facing south, the Orangery is a massive structure – its central gallery is more than 150 metres long with a 13-metre-high vaulted ceiling. During winter the plants are housed inside the Orangery, and during summer they are moved out to the Orangery Parterre on the north- →







south axis. At the right time of year one can stand on the terrace overlooking the parterre and see 1,500 citrus in tubs, the most common being the bitter orange. Others include lemons and bergamont orange, and even pink laurel and pomegranate.

My visit was in the dead of winter, and despite the dull weather and lack of colour I found the Gardens beautiful. The deciduous trees (yew, hornbeam and chestnut) with their tracery of bare branches framed the spaces. This allowed for a reading of the geometry where the fountains (basins) are located at the intersection of the different allées.

And when I next go to Versailles, I hope to do so in warmer weather so I can see the garden as a green collage and all the citrus out of the Orangery! And, of course, the chateau itself. **LO**

ABOVE TOP TO BOTTOM
The Grand Perspective towards the Grand Canal; The statues covered for protection over winter.

ELEMENTS AND TECHNIQUES

Optical illusion: The Grand Canal runs east-west and is intersected by two lateral canals of differing widths. Although they are asymmetrical, on viewing from the eastern end the effect is perfectly harmonious and symmetrical. This was Le Nôtre's most notable work, strengthened by the prominence of the chateau and it being the King's pet project.

Perspective: The Grand Perspective leads the eye to the horizon from the Water Parterre, along the main axis and on both sides of it, leading to infinity. As part of this, the Royal Way employs the principles of perspective. Walking down it, the level of the Grand Canal appears to change, and while walking up it plays with the revelation of the storeys of the chateau.

Mirror by the Water Parterre: The Water Parterre comprises two large rectangular pools, with bronze sculptures representing French rivers positioned on the corners. Le Nôtre used light as a design element, placing as much importance on it as he did plants. The expanse of water in the pools reflects the sun's rays and the pools act as mirrors.

Contrasts to complement: Light and shade are contrasted with shady groves next to lighter parterres; strict symmetry of the main axes contrasts with the criss-crossing of the diagonal secondary alleys; arbors form sectioned groves that have whimsical décor and water features to surprise visitors.