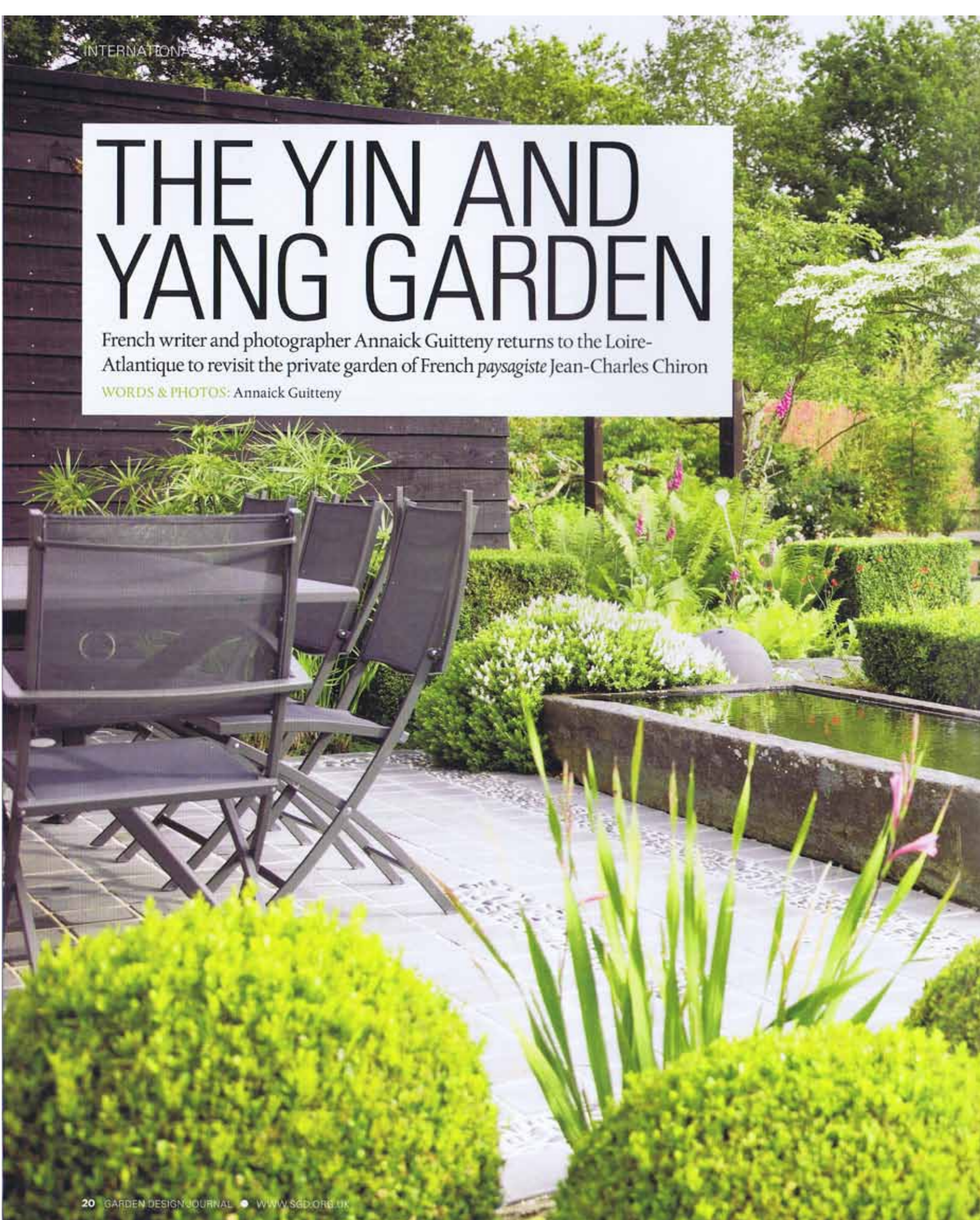


THE YIN AND YANG GARDEN

French writer and photographer Annaick Guitteny returns to the Loire-Atlantique to revisit the private garden of French *paysagiste* Jean-Charles Chiron

WORDS & PHOTOS: Annaick Guitteny





OPENING PAGE In the terrace, a *Commersonia* 'Missy Way' marks the entrance. The old trough is backed by a black wall
THIS PAGE Equipped for *hyemalis* against a backdrop of natural stone

It was 2009 when I first stumbled across Les Jardins du Perdrier, during one of my visits back to my home city of Nantes. The hamlet of Le Perdrier is located on the outskirts of Nantes, just outside a charming river port town called Sucé sur Erdre. Once a year, landscape gardener Jean-Charles Chiron opens the doors of Les Jardins du Perdrier as part of the 'Rendez-vous aux Jardins' event where some 2,000 public and private gardens open for a weekend in June.

Jean-Charles set up his landscape design business in 1996, specialising in modern gardens with an Asian touch. He moved with his family to Le Perdrier in 2000 where he set up his home and office; the gardens were created the following year. The site had previously been farmland and had been left uncultivated for a while, providing Jean-Charles with a rich soil and a totally blank canvas with only the hedges of oak and chestnut trees planted in the 1950s in place.

He could have opted for irregular, winding paths but instead decided on two perpendicular alleyways. The visitor is therefore greeted with a strong sense of perspective created by a long straight line, reinforced by the formal succession of topiary and hydrangeas 'Annabelle' on the left-hand side of the drive. It draws your eyes far into the distance, toward the monolithic stones appearing through a large circle in a bright red wall. This brings the first glimpse of one of Jean-Charles' major inspirations: the Chinese garden, and these architectural features are important elements of its design.

Perfect circle

A circle in a wall is called a 'Moon Gate' and symbolises perfection in China. As well as creating a passage, it acts like the zoom of a camera lens, helping to focus on a particular viewpoint. In her book, *The Chinese Garden*, Maggie Keswick says of garden architecture "[It] domesticates a wilderness or, as the Chinese say, 'borrows' the landscape, creating both the frame and the focus it lacked before." Over the centuries, stones have been a recurrent obsession to the point of worship status in Chinese culture as they represent holy mountains. In ancient times, it was believed that immortals inhabited these mountains and by bringing them into one's garden, they would confer immortality to the owner. In Chinese garden



design, a garden is viewed as a symbolic representation of nature, something that resonates in Jean-Charles' work. "I see a garden in the rugged mountains of the Pyrénées or a contorted pine battered by the winds in Portugal," he says.

Yet, at Le Perdrier he wanted to first and foremost create a garden for himself and his family, although he also wanted to be able to present his style to potential clients who came to the office. The garden aims to respond to key elements most of his clients require: easy maintenance, while providing interest throughout the year with the use of evergreen vegetation. Finally, its size, almost four acres, provided him with the space to experiment with all the ideas he had accumulated over the years.

He says that his aim was "not to recreate the perfect Chinese or Japanese garden like Erik Borja had achieved with his Zen garden, but to combine various inspirations in one garden". This results in some seemingly opposite styles interacting with each other, which Jean-Charles enjoys but adds, "These should blend in a harmonious manner and remain coherent throughout." The topiary of the alleyway is reminiscent of the western style of the formal French garden while the architectural features transport



ABOVE TOP The garden is divided into discrete areas by intersecting walls. The colours – red and black – emphasise the Eastern theme
BOTTOM Jean-Charles Chiron sitting by the pool. Smooth concrete stepping stones lead the way to his office, which is bordered by lotuses



LEFT Black concrete 'Monoliths' line the alleyway which leads to the red moon gate
BELOW Plan of Les Jardins du Perdrier

you to Asia. Furthermore, the garden has a resolutely modern touch but here and there, some traditional materials and techniques peer through. The area leading to his office has been divided into a series of rooms with large schist panels. These were used to build walls of stables or fenced-up fields in the region, which Jean-Charles found in a local quarry. A major feature of this part of the garden is a rectangular pool, inside which two rows of lotus (*Nelumba alba grandiflora*) run down the sides. The pool is surrounded by a carpet of black pebbles, an ancient paving technique commonly used in the southern parts of Europe and called a "calade" in Provence, but it is also found in Japanese and Chinese mosaic design. Japanese stepping-stones made of pale, smooth concrete circles run through the pool.

Back to black

Jean-Charles likes to emphasise a strong structure with large vertical architectural features, such as black concrete walls. These might be a nod to Pierre Soulages, a painter he admires and whose concept of 'Ultrablack' is based on how light is reflected from the colour black. These walls form a blank backdrop in front of which plants such as *Stipa gigantea* undulate gracefully, creating a living painting. He likes "a structure without any concession but softened with a certain elegance and lightness". The splaying stems of *Stipa gigantea* give the illusion of a golden water fountain while at their feet, Jean-Charles has planted a slope of *Buxus*

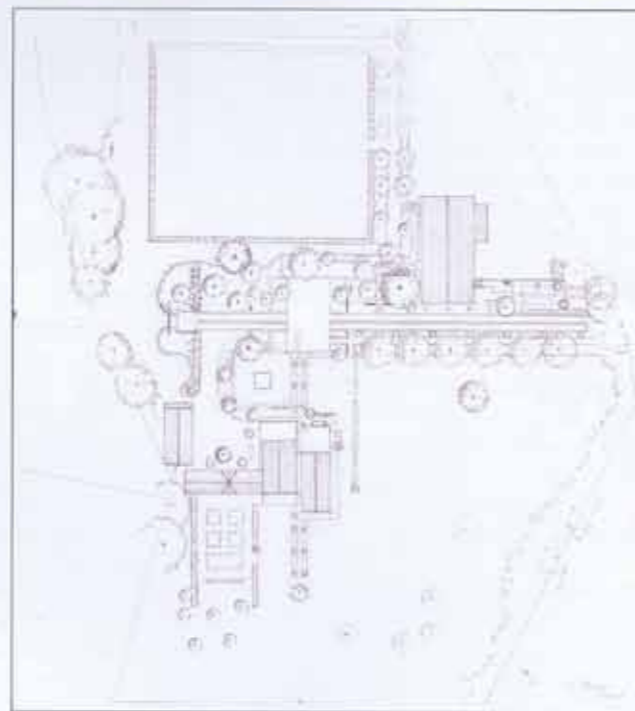
sempervirens spheres, their curvaceous shape breaking the vertical accent. With the sun out and a little breeze, these walls are a canvas against which the leaves of maple trees create a perpetual shadow show.

Regarding plants, his palette is fairly monochromatic. He likes to play with subtle tones of greens and greys with touches of colour provided by hardy plants such as field poppies. His main focus gears towards their graphic shape, shown by the presence of *Equisetum hyemale* and *Cyperus involucreatus*. He also has a soft spot for the *Prunus serrula* with its beautiful copper-coloured trunk and amazing blossom in spring.

The final space surrounds the terrace of blue stones and pebbles, next to the house. An old trough is topped with a twisted copper pipe made by Jean-Charles while slabs of schist interspaced with *Euphorbia characias* delimits a prairie-style area which integrates the garden within the bucolic countryside. Jean-Charles follows with interest Gilles Clément's "Jardin en Mouvement" which aims to increase biodiversity by letting flora and fauna to freely develop. He loves Clément's motto: "To create a garden, one needs a plot of land and the eternity."

Despite, or maybe thanks to, the polar styles he works with, Jean-Charles Chiron has achieved an undeniable balance within his own garden, between the east and the west, the modern and the traditional, the yin and the yang. ☺

More details about Chiron Landscapes and Les Jardins du Perdrier at www.chiron-paysage.fr



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