

Backyard

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with plants

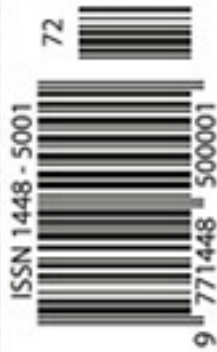
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The existing building was modified so that indoor and outdoor spaces are better connected, have continuity and are more in harmony.

BELOW The paving used among the *Phyla nodiflora* groundcover is a strong local limestone.



WORDS: DANIELLE TOWNSEND
PHOTOS: CHRISTIAN PRÉAUD

I am a strong believer that garden-making calls for a lot more than a good knowledge of plants and serves a much wider purpose than just being 'pretty,'" says landscape architect/garden designer Christian Préaud of Atelier Jardins. "It is architecture daring nature to shape a little piece of the world into one client's fantasy of paradise. A dive into human psychology and a unique chance to experiment with every form of artistic expression, shaping the space, sculpting the land, painting with matter and colours, composing rhythms to accommodate the seasons and finding the overall harmony. It requires discipline — a project has a beginning and an end that needs you to keep focusing on the momentum while your heart remains open to inspiration."

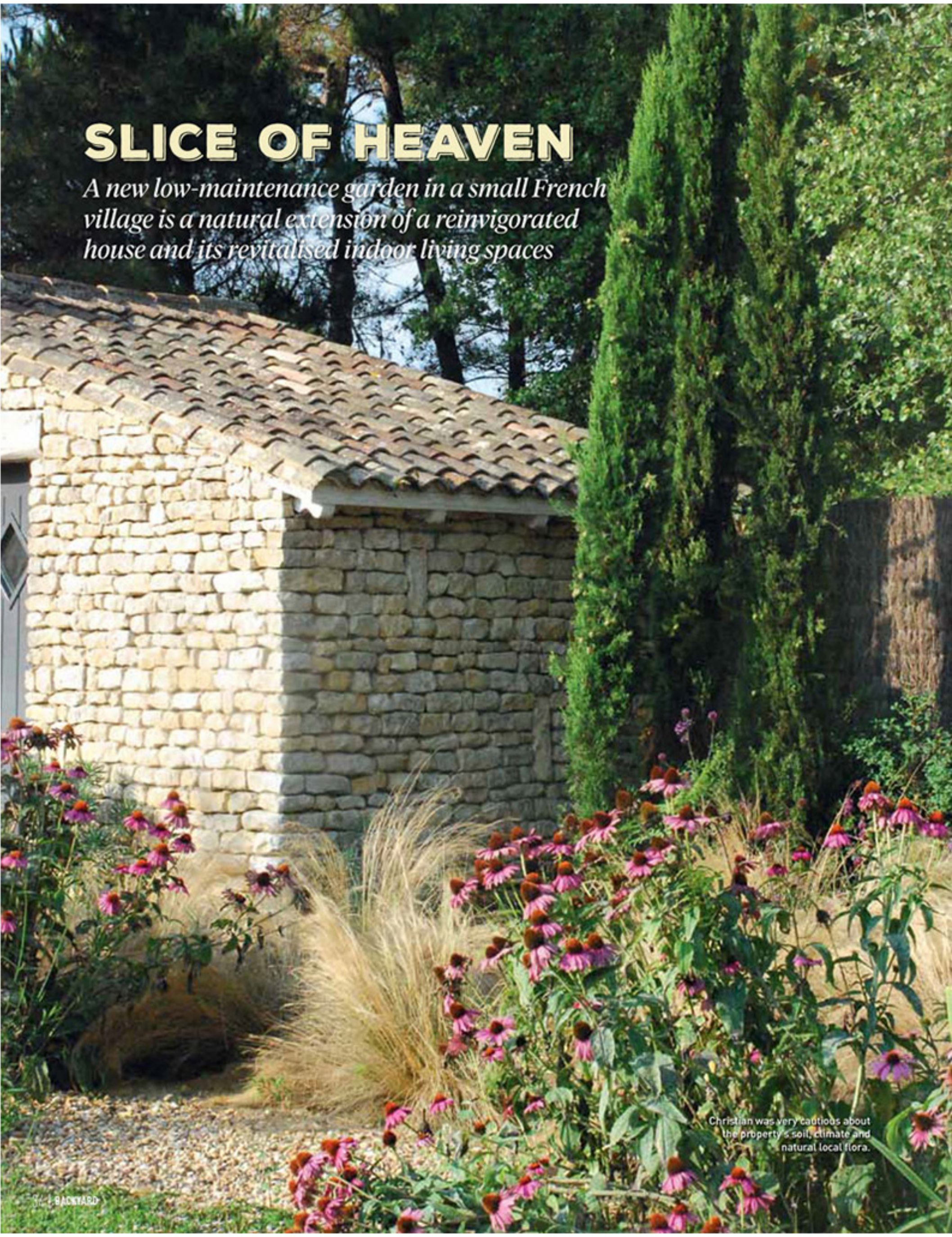
Armed with this philosophy, there was no particular brief for Christian and the Atelier



The house was built 20 years ago and the new garden was to be enjoyed as a natural extension of the house.

SLICE OF HEAVEN

A new low-maintenance garden in a small French village is a natural extension of a reinvigorated house and its revitalised indoor living spaces



Christian was very cautious about the property's soil, climate and natural local flora.



The new garden is enjoyed as a natural extension of the house.



Christian planted species that like poor and dry soils.

Jardins team for this project, except to re-examine the house that had been built 20 years ago and to create a new garden that could be enjoyed as a natural extension of the house. The clients were completely open to any ideas, as long as their garden was a low-maintenance one.

Their property is located in a small French village, Les Portes-en-Ré, on the island of Ré, facing the town of La Rochelle, in the Vendée region. The village is in a forest of pine trees, live oaks and poplars, which grow in sandy soil on a carpet of giant ferns.

"For me, the garden is really the outside extension of the indoor living space, so every aspect of daily life can, and should, take place in it," says Christian. "This is why I believe that garden design is, before anything else, an architectural approach. It happens more

and more that through the process of working on the landscape, Atelier Jardins proposes (or is asked) to modify the existing building so that both spaces, indoor and outdoor, are better connected, have continuity, are more in harmony and better serve the needs of the people who live in it. I am able to offer that whole approach as the firm's staff includes architects as well as landscape architects."

Christian and his team redesigned the front of this house, creating large workshop-like windows that open onto generous-sized timber terraces bordered with low dry-stone walls. These walls around the terraces were built with the same local limestone used for the house walls and paving.

"The idea was to double the impression of available living space by creating the same



Large workshop-like windows open onto generous-sized timber terraces bordered with low dry-stone walls.

TOP LEFT AND BELOW The walls around the terraces were built with the same local limestone used for the house walls and paving.



"As for all gardens I design, I am very cautious about soil, climate and natural local flora"

The garden is the outside extension of the indoor living space.

surface outdoors as indoors," says Christian. "In summer, when the windows are open, it is just one big indoor/outdoor floor plan. In winter, even with the windows closed, the inside of the house is still fully connected with the garden and the garden remains part of the indoors."

The large studio-like bay windows were built to measure in galvanised steel by a well-known ironsmith from Rennes, Rémi Crézé, who Christian says "has been a faithful partner for many years". The use of steel allows for a very thin structure, which therefore gives a greater feeling of transparency.

The terraces, meanwhile, were made of ipe wood, a very strong and dense timber that is very close to teak, does not need any maintenance and turns into the same grey-

silver colour. "Also, it is much easier to trace its origin and to make sure it comes from FSC-labelled plantations," says Christian.

The garden was then lovingly created by landscaping contractor, Alex le Jardinier. "We decided to go for a 'dry garden', with a selection of annuals, perennials, shrubs and trees that would need no watering whatsoever except for the rain and natural moisture of the seashore," says Christian.

The property includes trees such as live oaks, Florence cypresses and mulberry; and perennials such as *Acanthus*, *Eryngium*, *Echinops*, *Euphorbia characias*, *Foeniculum iris*, *Sisyrinchium* and *Verbena bonariensis*; while shrubs such as box, lavender, sage, rosemary, *Helichrysum*, *Pistacia lentiscus*, *Cistus* and *Gaura* were also planted.

"A close eye was required for the garden's first two years, mostly to make sure that the local gardener in charge of the maintenance did not sneak in with a watering hose!" laughs Christian. "Habits are strong ... but watering those plants would have killed most of them."

"As for all gardens I design, I am very cautious about soil, climate and natural local flora. One must learn from what nature tells you. It makes it possible to grow a garden successfully without pouring on tonnes of fertiliser and chemicals to cure unavoidable diseases if you try to go against nature. In this particular case, with the sandy soil being very free-draining and not able to retain much organic matter, it would have been crazy to imagine planting anything else but species that like poor and dry soils."

Christian's design also incorporates grasses such as *Deschampsia*, *Stipa tenuissima* and *Pennisetum*; and groundcovers including *Phyla nodiflora* and *Thymus*.

The paving used among the *Phyla nodiflora* groundcover is a strong local limestone, the same that was used for most walls on the property.

The fencing is heather as it is mandatory by local urban regulations. "We doubled it with a lower hedge of *Osmanthus* to break the wall-like feeling it otherwise creates," says Christian.

"I am quite proud of the whole project, it is very homogenous and therefore harmonious. The clients love it. They told me they had the feeling they moved into a brand new place. Mission accomplished!"



TOP LEFT, LEFT, ABOVE AND BELOW The 'dry garden' has a selection of annuals, perennials, shrubs and trees that would need no watering except for the rain and natural moisture of the seashore — talk about low-maintenance.

