

# Didier Wirth

The founder of the European Institute of Gardens and Landscape on raising the status of gardens in France and why the Burgundy landscape can still stop him in his tracks

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The cross-channel ferry is a pleasingly old-school way of getting to France, and the six-hour crossing from Portsmouth to Caen, in the Calvados region of Normandy in northern France, proves as smooth as the proverbial water feature. It's still light as I disembark at 9pm on an August evening, and Didier Wirth is waiting to greet me. Tall and urbane, distinguished yet friendly, he mentions that he woke that morning on one of the Greek islands and has spent all day travelling home to Normandy for our meeting.

Before taking me back to his own house we drop by another château in this corner of Calvados. The Château de Bénouville is where Didier works (some of the time) as it contains the offices of the European Institute of Gardens and Landscapes, the organisation he set up in 2013 and is now energetically fostering after a career in the pharmaceuticals business ('retired' does not seem an appropriate word to use about Didier, though he is now in his mid seventies).

Didier's own home of the past 24 years is the Château de Brécý, a pretty, mansard-roofed château dating from around 1630. As night falls he shows me with justified pride the avenue of trees he replanted to create a fittingly grand entrance drive. Directly behind the façade is a gem of a terraced garden, realised spatially in the spirit of the Italian Renaissance, though its detail is more typically French.

The next morning we rendezvous in a tapestry-covered salon, and Didier takes me on a tour of the garden and then – something I had heard about from garden-history colleagues – his superb library of antiquarian garden and architectural books. He seems to have every modern book on gardens, too, and when I present him with the French edition of one of my own recent tomes, he looks at me quizzically. (Of course, he already owns it.)

It transpires Didier's grandfather was a former French prime minister, so perhaps unsurprisingly Didier had a classic establishment background, attending military academy and then university, where he studied mathematics, before teaching himself chemistry as preparation for joining his father's pharmaceutical firm. "My grandfather told me: 'Never go into politics.' I was tempted once – but then I remembered."

From his grandfather Didier inherited a love of the Burgundy landscape. "As a boy I spent holidays at his Burgundy house, learning how to swim and fish. It's granite country, with small hills, meadows and forest – beech mainly, but some oak. It's pretty wild – the woods are full of wild boar and mushrooms. It's my landscape, and wherever I drive in Europe I always stop the car if I see something like it."

As a businessman, Didier established research laboratories in California and Ireland as well as France, before selling up to a

multinational in 1999 at the age of 58. Unshackled from business, Didier was ready to pursue a lifelong interest in architecture, which his father had forbidden him to study as a young man. But life took a different turn when his late wife, Barbara, who had amassed a serious collection of garden books while still in her twenties, joined the International Dendrological Society, which promotes the study of trees. "I was furious when I discovered I was not allowed to join my wife on an expedition to British Columbia. The form said 'consorts not allowed'. So I became a member. And then I started to get interested myself, and eventually became vice president."

With admirable Gallic candour Didier remarks: "I have a great love of grand avenues of trees." But his interest in gardens more generally began to burgeon, nurtured initially through book collecting. When he and Barbara took on the semi-derelict Brécý the first thing they did was build the library in an old barn overlooking the courtyard.

A natural leader and well connected, it was not long before Didier was prevailed upon to take charge of the local gardens organisation in Normandy and a few years after that, the national federation, which he hugely expanded, adding 13 new regional associations. This in turn led to the Institute, his latest venture.

"Napoleon once said, 'Gardens are a distraction for bankers' – the idea behind the Institute was to try to convince the French public that the garden is an important subject," Didier explains. "We had no funding for a base in Brussels or Strasbourg, so we created the Institute with the local authority here in Calvados." In fact, Didier himself part funds the Institute.

Its first aim is to create a huge online database that can be searched to find information on everything from specialist nurseries to historic garden sites across Europe. There is also potential for a physical archive of European garden plans and drawings – the Château de Bénouville was until recently the base of the region's accounts department and has two miles of shelving, currently empty.

Those empty shelves are perhaps symbolic of the potential of this organisation. And if anyone can pull it all together, Didier can. □

## USEFUL INFORMATION

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