



Gardening the French Way

With the help of archival drawings, historian Robert E. Smith has re-created a nineteenth-century-style garden on his Creole plantation

by Susan Stiles Dowell Photographs by Tina Freeman

Robert E. Smith has been known to ask the marks on an old door to select the hardware they want. He's interrogated the ruined site of a plantation until the blooming of a few stalwart species recalls the traces of plant beds. He's moved old buildings, siting, angling, and landscaping them to echo their memories of the past.

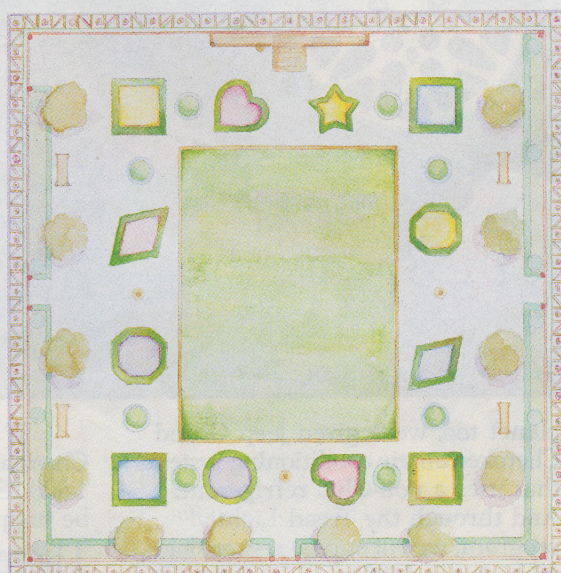
So sensitive is this restoration consultant to the resonances of Louisiana's past, he has re-created a small Creole plantation near Breaux Bridge from nine recycled period structures (see June 1991 *Southern Accents*).

Naturally, when this soft-spoken, eerily past-perfect historian and co-owner of two shops, both called Au Vieux

Paris Antiques, began a garden for his plantation some fifteen years ago, he left no stone unturned. To

begin with, he summoned inspiration from all the gardens he had ever visited in Louisiana and France, or worked on for clients, including Latiolais House, the oldest house in Lafayette Parish, Oak Grove Plantation, and Sidney Martin Plantation.

"Historical garden restoration is difficult because the original features tend to be erased by time," says Smith. "Notarial archive drawings are a fruitful source of Colonial, late eighteenth-, and early



ABOVE: White picket fencing, well documented in old Louisiana, encloses Robert E. Smith's garden. For buying information, see Sourcebook.
LEFT: The shapes of Smith's flower beds also occur in French decorative arts. Illustration by Melanie Magee.

RIGHT: For a tête-à-tête repast in the spring garden, Smith brings out the pressed linen, circa 1830 Old Paris porcelain, and Fiddle Thread silver.



nineteenth-century garden documentation in Louisiana,” he says. “Often these drawings, which are incidental in architectural survey books, even have valuable elevations depicting plant material and its treatments.”

One of the most important sources for Smith’s garden was the

1831 garden of the Academy of the Sacred Heart at Grand Coteau, some fifteen miles away from his plantation. “I visited often and spied its shaped flower beds,” he says. “An early letter exists from one of the first nuns saying the design copied Bishop Bossuet’s garden in Meaux, near Paris, which had been de-

THE GARDEN

signed by André Le Nôtre. The only other garden in Louisiana that I know that preserves those shapes from original plantings is Bermuda Plantation in Natchitoches Parish.”

There’s special excitement for an antiquarian such as Smith, who’s sensitive to the prevalence of the heart-, star-, diamond-, circle-, square-, and octagon-shaped decorations in the French arts. “I see these motifs over and over,” says Smith, “inlaid on armoires, carved on mantels, and pierced on the tops of bedwarming pans.” At the Sacred Heart garden, the shapes are probably only one step removed from the source of their inspiration—those ornately patterned gardens of the seventeenth-century château gardens designed by the great Le Nôtre.

Smith’s flower beds are edged in

THE GARDEN



ABOVE: Louis Philippe rose stock, transplanted from Smith's great-grandparents' garden, fills the center of the privet heart and star, shapes documented by 19th-century sources.

BELOW: Twelve crepe myrtle standards anchor the shaped flower beds defining the perimeter of the garden. Roses, poppies, rain lilies, phlox, and coreopsis are some of the old-fashioned flower varieties "borrowed" over the years from friends and abandoned house sites.



brick and encompassed by pea gravel, as is historically correct. "Pea gravel was ubiquitous in nineteenth-century Louisiana gardens," says Smith, who remembers playing with the pebbles as a child in his aunt's driveway.

"Jefferson used a pea gravel walk at Monticello the same way I have, around a *tapis vert*, or green rug. It's the French way, and he would have seen this when he was in France," he says.

Like the most inveterate gardeners, Smith remembers his plants like old friends (most of his stock has come from friends and family). He dug up the only four Louis Philippe roses in his grandmother's garden in New Iberia in 1970, which, in turn, had been growing in her father's yard since the nineteenth century. Appropriately, these originals fill the center of the heart- and star-shaped privet hedges.

Memories, realities, and dreams are also components of Smith's garden world. From his memories of childhood, friendships, and favorite places, he gathers the joy he cherishes for living in the moment.

"This," he explains, "is the reality part. To be in the beauty of the moment. I have dreams, too," he adds wistfully. "My allée of live oak trees will be splendid a hundred years after I'm gone; it will be sublime in two hundred. But in three hundred years, experiencing those oak trees will be positively transcendental." ◇

For further reading and inspiration, Robert E. Smith recommends the following gardening books: Wild Flowers of Louisiana and Adjoining States by Clair A. Brown, LSU Press, 1972; Perennial Garden Color for Texas and the South by William C. Welch, Taylor Publishing Company, 1989; Antique Roses for the South by William C. Welch, Taylor Publishing Company, 1990.