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SET IN MOTION

Made up of a series of ridges and swales to replicate the sandbanks and flood channels of the nearby River Loire, slow-show garden Le Tourbillon de la Succession is designed to demonstrate how plant communities in contrasting habitats adapt and transform over time

WORDS: HANNAH GARDNER PHOTOGRAPHS: ANDREA JONES



Château de Chaumont-sur-Loire, a turreted fairytale castle set amid sweeping grounds, has nobly overlooked the meandering and fast-running River Loire for almost 500 years. It is now a museum and since 1992 an annual International Garden Festival has been hosted in the grounds between the months of April and October. The Festival's focus is on sustainable, slow-show gardens that grow throughout a season, not just for a few weeks. Also of interest is the Prés du Gouloup, a large area of the estate that showcases permanent installations. Open all year round, there is a great diversity of design inspiration to be found here.

Le Tourbillon de la Succession is one such high-profile, permanent garden that was installed here last spring, having first been built as a show garden for the 2025 edition of the Festival, the theme of which was *Once Upon a Time, In the Garden*. Taking inspiration from Chaumont's immediate environs, the former show garden mimics a dynamic alluvial landscape by placing completely contrasting wet and dry habitats directly next

Opposite, top: the planted sand ridges of the garden include *Eragrostis spectabilis* 'Purpurflirren' (purple love grass), *Erigeron karvinskianus* (Mexican fleabane) and *Sphaeralcea ambigua* 'Childerley' (globe mallow). Opposite, bottom left: *Elaeagnus commutata* shrubs are planted in circular, permeable fabric planters by BACSAC® and placed on the soil surface as no excavation for woody plants is permitted on the listed historic site. Opposite, bottom right: *Sphaeralcea ambigua* 'Childerley'.

to each other. This approach explores the ecological process of succession and how plants colonise space and create plant communities adapted to environmental conditions.

The garden has been created by landscape architects and horticulturists Cassian Schmidt, Bettina Jaugstetter, and Anna Lena Hahn, who collaborated as a stellar design team committed to creating visually compelling, dynamic plant communities that adapt and transform over time.

As Cassian explains, 'The model for this work is the sandbanks and wet depressions or flood channels of the Loire, which can be seen very clearly from the top windows of the castle.' The layout features a radial mosaic of undulating, free-draining sand ridges and low-moisture-retentive troughs, and a gravel path meanders through the stylised riverscape to provoke an immersive experience and enable close observation. At the centre, the ground gently falls away to create a wet zone that, planted with *Carex*, *Juncus*, and young junipers, is the green heart of the garden.

The shape of water

The 'Tourbillon' in the name of the project suggests a kind of vortex or whirlwind and picks up on the garden's themes of water and the dynamics of succession. Interestingly, the design also nods to the previous installation that inhabited this plot: after many years, Chris Drury's Carbon Pool (also a vortex) was dismantled but the charred timber he had used in that creation has been retained and reimagined as driftwood within the swales of Cassian, Bettina and Anna's design. The ridges are formed by building up banks of nutrient-poor, mineralic substrate to simulate the dry, sandy banks of a river, with the low-lying moist and fertile hollows (the swales) in between. The soil here is rich in organic matter and nutrients and the damp conditions conducive to the decomposition of wood and the building of soil health.

The Prés du Gouloup is a very open site but the garden is placed towards its edge and benefits from the presence of mature trees and an established mixed shelter belt. Multi-stem *Elaeagnus commutata* are repeated throughout the new design, evoking the silvery, slim-leaved trees that grow nearby on the banks of the River Loire. In the garden, they grow in permeable fabric BACSAC® planters that rest on the ground, a compromise necessitated by woody planting restrictions in the listed historic park. →



The rest of the plants are perennials, ferns, grasses or bulbs. Anna details the ratios of their different mixes according to the mixed planting system, which works out 'at about 15 per cent structural plants, 40 per cent companion plants and about 40 per cent ground cover plants with five per cent self-seeding species such as *Dianthus carthusianorum* that will seed around and fill gaps'.

A sense of place

In the swales, the lush, structural foliage of *Libertia grandiflora* and *Iris sibirica* associate with dense mounds of *Sesleria autumnalis* and *S. heuffleriana* and a variety of colourful *Juncus* and sedge species. *Penstemon digitalis* 'Pocahontas', *Calamintha nepeta* 'Triumphator', *Eryngium planum*, and *Salvia nemorosa* 'Blauhügel' occupy transitional zones alongside statuesque umbellifers such as *Angelica archangelica*. The design is led by habitat creation, atmospheric and naturalistic, with the shimmering narrow leaves of *Salix rosmarinifolia* a further visual link to the local wetlands and achieving a strong sense of place.

On the dry ridges, the plant palette focuses on stress-tolerant and drought-resistant pioneer species from steppe-like habitats, species that are attractive to many pollinators, especially wild bees. *Agastache* 'Blue Fortune' contrasts beautifully with mounds of acid green *Euphorbia seguieriana* subsp. *niciciana* and both are prolific self-seeders. *Allium* 'Millennium' and *A. christophii* are scattered here and there amongst the felty silver discs

Above, left: an aerial view reveals the star-shaped pattern of sand ridges, troughs and interweaving gravel paths of the riverscape design. Above, right: *Aster pyrenaicus* 'Lutetia'.

of *Salvia argentea* and floriferous *Crambe maritima*, a tough sea kale, and *Aster pyrenaicus* 'Lutetia' and a host of variable umbellifers (amongst them *Seseli gummiferum* and *Pimpinella saxifraga*) join *Origanum laevigatum* 'Herrenhausen' in being linked to the native flora of disturbed, dry soils. *Erigeron karvinskianus* and a stunning rosy haze of *Eragrostis spectabilis* (purple love grass) will also freely seed around.

Finally, here, eye-catching structural plants such as *Stipa gigantea*, *Schizachyrium scoparium* 'Ha Ha Tonka' and *Sphaeralcea ambigua* 'Childerley', with its clear orange flowers and relaxed loose habit, are carefully placed to bring cohesion.

In relocating Le Tourbillon de la Succession, one challenge has been to manage the limited areas of heavy site compaction and there are plans to alleviate this and improve drainage in the coming months. The garden was irrigated during its first (very dry) summer last year, to aid establishment, but any ongoing interventions and inputs will be minimal. Management will be very light touch and centred on the observation of dynamic succession for, as Anna says, 'this is the point'.

This is an inspiring, dynamic garden and revisiting as it evolves will be illuminating. ●

Domaine de Chaumont-sur-Loire is open all year round; for details, visit domaine-chaumont.fr/en/practical-information. To submit a design for consideration for the 2027 edition of the International Garden Festival, email concours@domaine-chaumont.fr.