

An Irish garden provides ideas as souvenirs



Adrian Higgins/The Washington Post - Tanguy de Toulgoët's garden in Ireland.

By [Adrian Higgins](#),

Feb 20, 2013 05:46 PM EST

The Washington PostPublished: February 20

Gardeners tend to be so rooted in their own patch that they forget to look at what others are doing. When I say “they,” I mean “I.”

So the other day, when visiting Ireland, I jumped at the chance to see the garden of Tanguy de Toulgoët, who represents the curious traveler’s jackpot: He brings the rich traditions of the French edible garden to the fertile soil of the Emerald Isle. For 18 years he has been one breed of Celt — a Breton — in the land of another, and it seems to suit him. From an intensively cultivated one-acre smallholding, he and his wife, Isabelle, and their two daughters live well off the land. Homegrown vegetables, fruit, herbs, fowl, eggs, honey and more find their way to the country table of their pretty, white-gabled house in the Irish county of Laois.



(Adrian Higgins/The Washington Post) - Tanguy de Toulgoet employs French practices for edible gardening on his property in Ireland and offers day courses to visitors.

Even in its winter bareness, the garden is both productive and instructive, and what strikes me as interesting is that it is not a flower garden, an herb garden, an orchard or a veggie plot, but all of those things in one. Tanguy refers to it as a potager, which is the French term for an eclectic kitchen garden. But described thus, the terraced beds provide an extraordinary horticultural melange. He pulls apart a raised bed of greens to unearth a potato that formed last summer but now is ready for a winter stew. Elsewhere, he unearths a celeriac, and in another spot he pulls back the ground to reveal a blanched endive. He covers it again for safe keeping. It's as if he is foraging in a wilderness of his own planting.

Tanguy, who turned 48 on the day I visited, has been growing vegetables since he was a kid. He says he prefers to describe his practices as sustainable rather than organic. You might also call them holistic, because he combines traditional French methods with a reliance on “biodynamics,” including herbal concoctions that feed and medicate his plants. For crop rotation, he groups plants by “their organs,” that is, he will put root crops — potatoes and parsnips, for example — in one area; leafy plants in another; fruited plants like tomatoes or strawberries in a third, and flowers in a fourth.

He says it is a mistake to put too much compost in the soil — the plants get large but “soft” and become targets for feeding caterpillars and other pests.

He has a lot of flowers: flowers to draw pollinators, to feed the bees and to provide the raw material for his tonics, which might be made from comfrey, yarrow, valerian, winter and summer savory and hyssop. After cutting these herbs in season, he presses them for three weeks and makes a tea that is then sprayed on plants as a fungicide or pesticide, or just a general plant tonic. “I use them to cure other plants.”

He takes the cork out of a clay bottle and invites me to take a whiff. There is no smell, which is pretty amazing considering he made the contents six months ago — a black herbal tea infused with thyme, rosemary and savory. The savory is an effective whitefly repellent and the thyme is an antibacterial, he says. The dried clumps of burdock sit on the garden beds and act as a natural fungicide because the common weed is rich in copper, he says. His young apple and pear trees appear to be painted white, but they are coated in a spray made of

porcelain clay mixed with a slurry of cow manure. The former creates a barrier to insects and birds, and the latter makes it persist in the wet Irish weather.

In a lower garden, he has put in a new planting of pears, but the saplings are set at 45 degrees rather than upright. This seems wrong to those of us who have spent hours in our lifetimes making sure new trees are planted vertically, but Tanguy says that is how you form a hedge of pears in France. This, no doubt, would take skilled seasonal clipping to maintain and would be undone either by neglect or poor pruning.

I am also struck by the sheer number of old French roses that have been planted about the place, both bushes and climbers. Rose season starts later here and lasts longer, and one imagines a summer full of color and fragrance. The rose fruits, the hips, no doubt will be harvested and put to use in autumn.

He takes me to his beehive, which is called a [Warre hive](#). In function if not form, it mimics a log in the way the bees make comb without frames. The hive is smaller, simpler and cheaper than the conventional hive I know. The peril for bees in the winter hive is not so much the cold as the condensation, which is why the beekeeper leaves the lid propped open a little. In Tanguy's hive, the top cover contains a blanket of wood chips. This allows you to keep the hive closed while the chips absorb the moisture, keeping the bees dry and more snug. When the chips get damp, you simply replace them.

Some of his principles look to old Irish practices, such as the way potatoes were planted in the spring amid the already tall barley. If a late frost came, the barley provided a protective blanket for the sprouting spuds. Instead of barley, Tanguy uses a pretty little cover crop called phacelia.

Tanguy and Isabelle are endearingly entrepreneurial about his little haven that they have created, giving day courses to small groups of visitors — in gardening, in cooking and in French. One course encompasses all three at their [Dunmore Country School](#).

I doubt I will adopt all of his approaches, but I left the garden with a keener regard for a balanced approach to cultivation and a healthier disregard of the boundaries between edible and decorative plants. For the de Toulgoets, the garden has an aesthetic beauty that comes from within. It is not forced or superficial but the product of traditional practices and good old-fashioned toil.