



OPPOSITE The turreted manor is approached by an avenue of lime trees that was the only evidence of former cultivation - in summer they form a 'cathedral of greenery'. THIS PAGE An entrance court (this picture), leads over a bridge and through the gateway. Near the house, box and yew are arranged in formal shapes, enclosing a wilder planting scheme (below)

SCENIC ROUTE

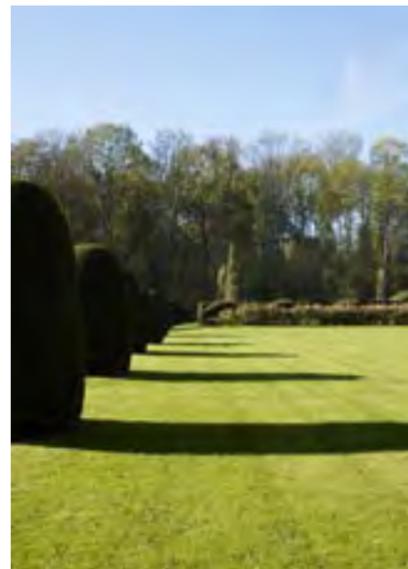
At a sixteenth-century manor house in southern Belgium, landscape architect Piet Blanckaert has created a garden, which, through its structure of hedges and pathways, leads the visitor on an intriguing journey

TEXT CLARE FOSTER | PHOTOGRAPHS JEAN-PIERRE GABRIEL

Being offered a completely blank canvas must be every garden designer's dream – especially when the canvas in question surrounds a fairy-tale, sixteenth-century manor house, complete with turrets, moat and medieval chapel, deep in the rolling countryside of southern Belgium. When Bruges-based landscape architect Piet Blanckaert was first commissioned to design the garden here, there was nothing but an ancient avenue of limes and a few old cherry trees to suggest it had ever been cultivated. With no historical plans to guide (or indeed restrict) him, he developed a design that perfectly complements the house and outbuildings, combining both traditional and modern elements, yet above all retaining the magical character of the place. Now, 15 years on, the garden looks as if it has always been here, its structure defined by tall hedges and purposeful pathways that take the visitor on an exciting journey.

'All I could do was to imagine how the old garden would have been,' says Piet, whose design is influenced by some of the great British gardens. The existing lime avenue, described by Piet as a 'cathedral of greenery', was one of the few original features to be kept. It provides a grand approach to the property, leading up to a large entrance court paved with setts of local blue-grey stone reminiscent of the old, cobbled roads that survive in rural Belgium. At this point, the visitor is greeted with a series of turreted towers and long, austere grey walls, with no hint of what lies within. So it is with a heightened sense of anticipation that you are finally drawn through the archway into the inner part of the garden to see the drama unfold.

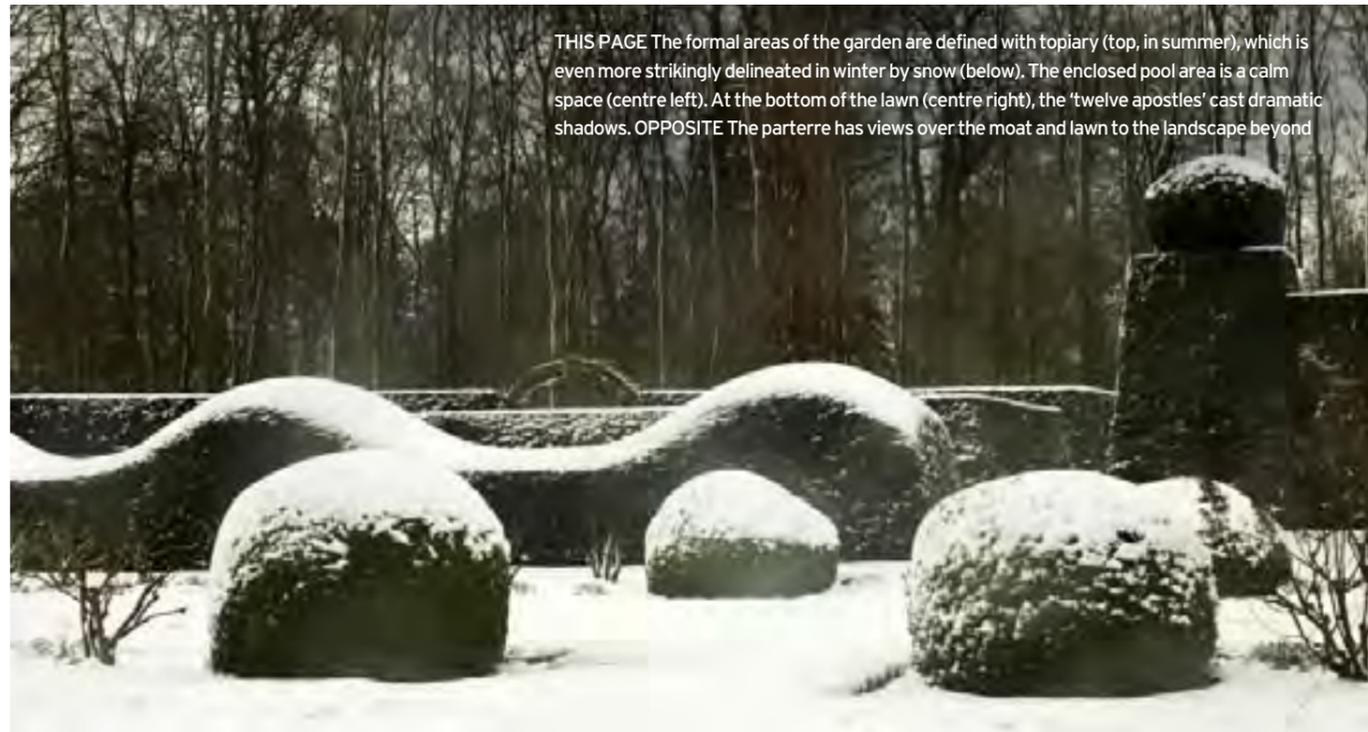
Once you are inside, the scene is breathtaking. A clearly defined structure is picked out in box and yew, the greenery clipped meticulously into imaginative shapes to give formal interest. In a tableau inspired by the seventeenth-century Levens Hall garden in Cumbria, some hedges resemble giant sea serpents, while others are reminiscent of the battlements of a castle. Individual giant yew shapes look as though they have



The garden's structure is defined by tall hedges and purposeful pathways that give formal interest



THIS PAGE The formal areas of the garden are defined with topiary (top, in summer), which is even more strikingly delineated in winter by snow (below). The enclosed pool area is a calm space (centre left). At the bottom of the lawn (centre right), the 'twelve apostles' cast dramatic shadows. OPPOSITE The parterre has views over the moat and lawn to the landscape beyond





A garden designer's dream, this 'blank canvas' surrounds a moated manor house

stood here for hundreds of years – in fact they were planted when the garden was begun 15 years ago as magnificent 100-year-old specimens sourced from a local nursery. Near the house is a low box parterre, the regimented, geometric hedges enclosing looser shrubs and perennials that look as if they're trying to escape the confines of their prison. Deeper into the garden there are two further quadrangles, both completely enclosed within tall yew hedges. A swimming pool is contained within one of these compartments, the sculpted yew buttresses reflected beautifully in the brimming water, while the second conceals a romantic 'secret garden', which in summer is filled with scented roses. The structure of the clipped hedges is complex and exciting, with different layers, heights and shapes creating maze-like alleyways and hidden entrances – all the more beautiful in winter with a dusting of frost or snow.

While these enclosed parts of the garden give it a strong backbone, the overall feeling here is one of open space, and this was something that Piet was anxious to preserve. 'I wanted to open up the view of the house from the lane which runs along the valley at the bottom of the garden and keep the view of the countryside from the house,' he says. One of the anchoring points of his design is an axis leading from the front door of the house through the parterre, across the moat, and down a long grassy walk with wide borders either side, drawing the eye down to the end of the garden and the landscape beyond. Here, a sweep of lawn ends in a ha-ha, with 12 imposing yew pillars standing sentry on the boundary – 'we call them the 12 apostles,' jokes Piet. The borders of the long walk, backed on one side by an undulating wave of yew, are planted simply and repetitively to provide interest in each season. In spring and early summer, the intense blue of *Nepeta* 'Six Hills Giant' dominates, while in summer, *Hydrangea paniculata* 'Burgundy Lace' takes over, turning from white to pink as it ages. In autumn, *Sedum* 'Herbstfreude' and the prolific *Aster lateriflorus* var.

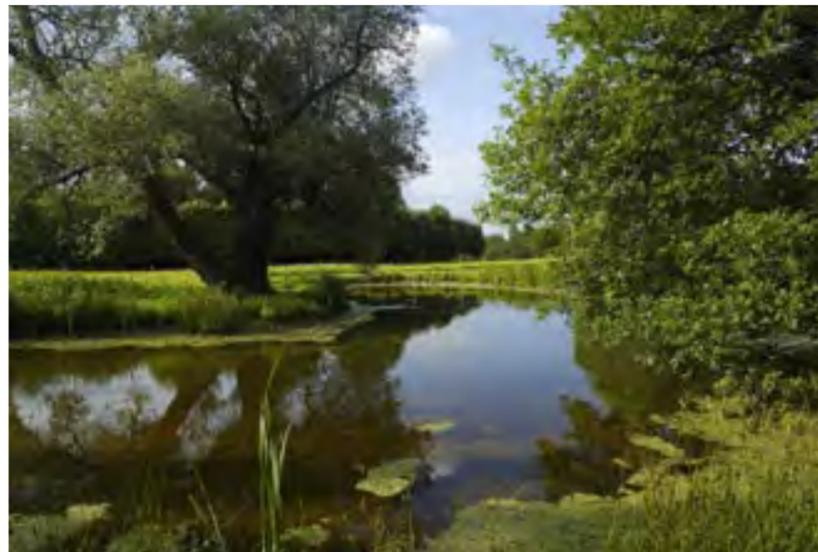


An axis leads from the moat (opposite), which often freezes over in winter, over a bridge (this page below) and into the rest of the garden, where snow provides a dramatic contrast to the stark shapes of trees and hedges. From the other side of the moat (top) there are views over open countryside (above), contrasting with the more enclosed views of the garden



horizontalis keep the borders going well into winter.

There is plenty to absorb the visitor in the formal garden, but there is more – much more – to be seen on the eastern side of the manor house. Across the moat, another, wilder part of the garden blends into the surrounding pastureland. ‘You shouldn’t see everything at once in a garden,’ says Piet mysteriously, playing his trump card as he leads the way over a wide wooden bridge into the unknown. Here, a magnificent serpentine hornbeam hedge sucks you in, and suddenly you’re enclosed within towering five-metre-high green walls, being drawn along a tunnel that curves in and out with no sense of what is beyond. When you reach the other end, you find yourself in a completely different place. A natural pond sets the scene, while a long rhododendron walk bordered by woodland feels wild and uncultivated in contrast to the clipped order of the formal garden. The tour has a spectacular finale – a 300-metre-long grassy walk leading back towards the manor house, bordered on either side by an avenue of limes and carpeted in spring with wild flowers.



It sounds a cliché, but a tour around this garden really does feel like a journey. It is the juxtaposition of formal and wild elements – and the sense of surprise and theatre that springs from this – that makes this garden exceptional. Although it is not a plantsman’s garden, the ingenuity of its layout and its sensitive dialogue with both the house and the landscape makes it an absolute triumph. As I leave, my attention is drawn to an inscription in Old French above the stone entrance archway, that translates roughly as: ‘To all people who own this property after me, please do what you can to improve it.’ The current owners can rest on their laurels. There can be no doubt that this charming country house has been improved many times over with the addition of its twenty-first-century garden, and future generations will have to work very hard to match the unprecedented changes that have taken place since Piet Blanckaert’s first visit 15 years ago □

Piet Blanckaert (tel: 00-32-50 39 72 74; www.blanckaert.com)

It is the juxtaposition of formal and wild elements that makes this garden exceptional



OPPOSITE The undulating lines of a five-metre-high hornbeam hedge (above and centre), flanked on one side by woodland, lead through to the other, wilder part of the garden. A natural pond (below) marks the change. THIS PAGE A long, grassy walk leading back to the house is bordered by banks of wild flowers and lime trees/hornbeam