

PHOTOS: SCHOENAICH REES



Faint letters on a stone next to a dusty track mark the entrance off the main road to the estate. Scrub gives way to vineyards, the road climbs, gets smoother, then paved and finally turns into a cobbled courtyard surrounded on three sides by a clipped bay hedge. Steps through a lush garden to a big, old, Provençal farmhouse beckon in one direction, while a path through a wall of eleagnus hedge and lined with yew cones leads to a 'Green Room' in the other.

Niches in the yew walls of this outdoor room are ready for busts of four female and four male gardening politicians. The garden's owner (ambassador to Belgium during Jimmy Carter's presidency) has filled two niches – with Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson (ambassadors as well) – and is currently looking for women candidates. The path ends at a circular area, which turns to the aromatic garden and eventually back to the house or up into the surrounding terraces of olive and pine trees.

The transition from the formal, cultivated part of the garden to wilder surroundings is a hallmark of Tim Rees' work in the south of France.

This Green Room and aromatic garden by Tim Rees of Schoenaich Rees Associates (who has worked extensively in the south of France and elsewhere) makes the final clever link that ties together the sequence of gardens started here several years ago, when the owner bought the then dilapidated property as a hideaway from her official duties. They provide two previously missing but essential ingredients of good garden design: the promenade – a continuous walk through all parts of the garden – and transitions from the formal cultivated garden to the wild surroundings.

In the Green Room, Rees has provided a cool, all-green landscape, ideal for a hot summer's day – plus a surprise ingredient that makes it even better for cooling off. With the help of electronic sensors and pumps, he has carried on a garden tradition that dates back to Leonardo da Vinci. Concealed jets form a surprise arcade of water between the yew cones as visitors enter; if they attempt an escape by heading onwards, a dome of water forms over the circular end of the garden.

The owner was less than enthusiastic when first discovering this feature by accident. Her grandchildren love it.

Southern belle

Tall trees and a hillside of umbrella pines and terraced olive trees screen from public view one of the most delightful gardens in Provence. Rick Mather visits the Green Room

The water feature is in the form of concealed jets, which produce a surprise arcade of water between the yew cones (right). View from parking court looking towards the Green Room (far right).

