

## FRENCH CONNECTION TOUR, 2009

*Dennis Superczynski*

In September 2009, several Holly Society Members and friends from the University of Tennessee Arboretum and Gardens journeyed to Western Europe for visits to Europe's grandest gardens, and to connect with our good friend and loyal Holly Society member Albert Neél and his wife, Anik.

First visiting the Netherlands, our modest-sized group of eight witnessed the events taking place at [FloraHolland](#), the largest flower auction in the world where 48 million flowers and plants are traded daily. It is a spectacular sight, with thousands of carts transporting fresh flowers and plants for shipment all over the world. Visiting local growers, the gardens of [Keukenhof Castle](#), and [Naktuinbouw](#), the Netherlands inspection service for horticulture, enabled us to capture the essence of this marvelous growing region.

We next visited [Les Jardins d'Annevoie](#), the Gardens of Annevoie near Brussels. They are spectacular natural water gardens with displays of breathtaking water features. Originally laid out by Charles-Alexis de Montpellier in the eighteenth century, the gardens reflect three different design concepts: the French style that dictates straight lines and long perspectives as 'art corrects nature;' the English style, where 'art imitates nature' by creating artificial reproductions of natural features; and the Italian style, where 'art adapts to nature' with



The Water Gardens of Annevoie. Photo by Dennis Superczynski.



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curves and surprise effects, especially using water. What a lovely prelude as our group headed into France to meet with Albert Neél at the [Château d'Yville](#) and his farm in [Yville, Normandy](#).

Arriving in [Varengeville](#) and [Sainte Marguerite sur Mer](#), not far from Château d'Yville, our group met Albert and his two friends, Jan Ravensberg and Bart Schupper, where we began our visit with a relaxing outdoor luncheon. Forty years ago all three were partners in a nursery in the Netherlands. We went to the nearby [Le](#)

[Vasterival Garden](#), a woodland garden created by Princess Sturdza, a Norwegian, and her husband, Prince Sturdza, a Romanian, in the mid-twentieth century. Considered to be one of



Princess Sturza's residence, La Vasterival Garden. Photo by Dennis Superczynski.

the most beautiful gardens in France, it is open to visitors by appointment only. An associate of the Princess led us through the naturalized private garden pathways overlooking the Seine River and allowed us to take photographs, something not often permitted. It has flowing lines and plants in naturalistic, romantic-style groupings, reminiscent of an English woodland garden. We next visited the nearby [Shamrock Hydrangea Collection](#), the French national collection and the largest Hydrangea collection in the world. Albert's friend and owner of the collection, Robert Mallet, escorted us through paths of hundreds of hydrangea varieties all in magnificent bloom at this

time of year. Our touring for the day concluded with dinner and an overnight in [Rouen](#), the historic capital of [Normandy](#).

The following morning our tour returned to Yville for an entire day to visit with Albert and Anik Néel at both Château d'Yville and their family farm and gardens. Here we were also greeted by Albert's sister Madeleine, his daughter Emmanuelle, and his two friends, Jan and Bart, for a tour of the Château grounds and arboretum. The back of the Château overlooks the Seine River and has formal terraced gardens planted with 2,000 David Austin roses, anchored by hollies and boxwoods. The eighteenth century Château is classified as a "monument historique classé" by the French Authorities and is privately owned, so it is usually closed to the public. In June 2008, the Château officially opened the trial gardens and the Holly collection with Albert Louis Néel as manager and curator. Albert is a collector of *Ilex* (Holly), *Buxus* (Boxwood), *Euonymus* (spindle bush), and *Syringa* (Lilac). The objectives of the holly trial garden are to study cultivars and varieties of holly; to study adaptation and resistance of hollies under varying acidity and light conditions; and to form a complete



The Néels Thatched Roof Home. Photo by Dennis Superczynski.



Pigeon Tower. Photo by Dennis Superczynski.

collection of both cultivars and hybrids for possible introduction to France of new varieties or species.

The trial gardens are located next to Albert's farm and thatched roof home where we all enjoyed refreshments before touring the collection. Well-labeled and manicured, the collection was a fascinating and rewarding botanical experience. Walled gardens and a brick pigeon tower presented a lovely backdrop for the collections. Following some pleasant leisure time on the Château grounds, Anik, Madeleine, and Emmanuelle prepared a delicious, intimate buffet luncheon for us inside the Château.

group to a one-hectare fenced plot in the forest containing only hollies, planted with very different conditions. Albert has dubbed this area "Hollywood," and it contains perfectly labeled plants along well-defined paths. We stopped at a nearby site with a huge thousand-year-old oak tree that dwarfed our group, where we were fortunate to have our photographs taken. The day ended with a lovely dinner at *Royal Couscous* and a return to Rouen for the evening.

After this lovely visit with Albert, his family and friends, it was time to leave for Paris and return home.

Along the way we stopped to

visit [Claude Monet's Garden](#) in [Giverny](#), a special treat, and finally arrived in Paris. We toured the [Champs-Élysées](#) that connects the [Arc de Triomphe](#) and the [Place de la Concorde](#) in the heart of [Paris](#) and visited the [Eiffel Tower](#). Ooh la la, the tour ended with an evening walk past the [Moulin Rouge Cabaret](#) for a farewell dinner on the hill in [Montmartre](#).

Guests on the tour included Holly Society members Dennis and Jan Superczynski, Jane Christy and Joan Johnson, and friends of the University of Tennessee Arboretum and Gardens Debbie Allen, Evelyn Lorenz, Sondra Jamison, and Russell Manning. Albert Neél's friends



Albert Neél's Holly Collection. Photo by Dennis Superczynski.

accompanying us were Jan Ravensberg, a nurseryman in Clara, County Offaly, Ireland, and Bart Schupper, Hazerswoude, Netherlands.

Our special thanks go to Albert and Anik Neél, Madeleine Neél, and Emmanuelle Zezioli-Neél for hosting our group in Yville.



The group under the thousand-year-old oak tree on the Château d'Yville grounds.  
Photo by Dennis Superczynski.



View from Albert's Cottage. Photo by  
Dennis Superczynski.