Behind an unassuming row of terraced village houses in Pithiviers, north-central France, lies an extraordinary rose garden, the sort that gardeners dream of. It billows with more than 500 different roses, ancient and modern, collected—or created—by octogenarian rose expert and breeder, André Eve.

Devoted to roses
André Eve has roses in his blood. His fascination with them drew him away from his employ (as a nurseryman and landscaper in Paris) the 37 miles (60km) south to Pithiviers, to train as heir apparent to the elderly, long-established French rose breeder, Marcel Robichon. Arriving in 1958, ‘wife in one hand, suitcase in the other’, André’s life developed to revolve around roses, working at the nursery during the day and in his formerly abandoned 18 x 80m (59 x 262ft) walled garden in the evening. He gradually transformed this space to display and study his ever-increasing collection of roses and other plants.

Access to André’s garden is via a passageway that leads between the terraced houses. Some 50 years after its inception, the garden wears its potential well, filling its girth and healthily straining at the boundaries in high summer, a billowing profusion of roses and other flowers, heady with perfume and vibrant with colour.

La vie en Rosa
Frenchman André Eve’s lifelong fascination with roses has resulted in a remarkable garden, assembled with typical Gallic flair, containing an impressive collection of these appealing and varied flowers.

Author: Jacky Hobbs, garden writer and stylist based in London and the Cotswolds. Photography: Clive Nichols.
New from old

Through his own nursery (sold to Truffaut garden centres in recent years), André soon became well known for rose breeding. He had a particular passion and reputation for older selections. ‘Roses Anciennes’, fondly referred to as ‘Grandmothers’ roses’. Over the years he has gathered beautiful and rare examples from around the world, selections of Bourbon, Gallica Moss, Noisette, Damask and Centifolia roses, contributing their qualities to André’s modern crosses.

The garden features long wooden pergolas built by André to house his many climbing and rambling roses (he championed the re-popularising of rambling roses in France). As a result, roses now spill over the beautiful old garden walls and lace through the towering boundary trees, unchecked. They scramble up the trunks of dead trees, stretch lazily over the sedum-planted roof of the summerhouse, shade the enclaves of the glasshouse and peer in the windows of the potting shed, assuming the garden for their own. André has introduced several of his own climbers: reddish-pink flowered Rosa ‘Albert Poyer’ (1979); red, white-centred R. care Fotochi (‘Beverley’, 2002); cerise pink R. Rose des Blés (‘Evebou’, 2005) and hinnescus pink R. Rosa (‘Bever’, 2002). In the garden, however, many plants wander un-named – seedlings that failed, for whatever reason, to attain the dizzy heights of commerciality, but pretty enough to merit their occupancy. Shrub and busch roses add to the rose-flower count. Many are his own creations, bestowed with beauty, perfume and often named after a lady, such as glowing pink Rosa Sylvie Vartan (‘Evesylvia’, 1969), palest pink R. Sophie (1972), and soft pink R. Miss Lorraine (‘Evelour’, 2000). These are planted in groups of three to assure generous proportions. They swell in sweeping, curved beds, outlined with snaking grass pathways...beneath roses are foliage plants, adding... texture and pattern...

Plant pairings

Amid the roses, André has planted thousands of spring bulbs, coccus and narcissi, followed by tulips. These, in turn, are succeeded by carefully orchestrated plantings of perennials: notably bi-coloured Crampanula persiciflora, Elsewhere, yellow Iris pseudacorus ‘Boy Davidson’ grows brilliant behind giant iridescent orbs of steely-lavender Allium cristophi. Soft blue Veronica umbessa ‘Georgia Blue’ and violet Salvia nemerosa ‘Ostfriesland’ complement the varying intensity of pinks and apricots afforded by the rose blooms.

The climbing and rambling roses are not all repeat flowering; many are paired with late-blooming clematis to prolong interest. Silver-stemmed deep purple Clematis ‘Brunette’ along with blue C. ‘Lord Nevill’ and C. ‘Niobe’ all extend flower colour into autumn.

Cushioned between and beneath roses are foliage plants, adding colour, texture and pattern; potentially invasive but attractive variegated ground elder (Aquipodium podagrius ‘Variegatum’) and spring flowering Euphorbia characias subsp. characias ‘Wulfen Silver’, are planted to soften and surprise, while coloured leaf heucheras such as dark purple Heuchera ‘Binoche’, and warm orange Heuchera ‘Marmalade’ add further contrast.

André also grows around 130 selections of Hosta with rippled or puckered leaves, including enormous, quilted Hosta ‘Abiqua Drinking Gourd’, blue-ripped ‘Hadspen Henric’ and the ribbed, variegated leaves of ‘Sagae’ and ‘Wide Brit’. These seem to flourish in the shade beneath the rose-strewn pergolas.

One man’s pleasure.

The garden’s creation and fulfillment is extraordinary, but so too is its maintenance, passionately tended by André Eve, now in his 80s. He tends his garden single-handedly and proclaims it to be his pleasure. André is meticulous and methodical, avoiding elaborate plant and soil treatments, and maintains that his plants are like people: ‘if they eat well and drink well, they will carry themselves well’. So he personally waits on all of them – feeding, watering, weeding, pruning and mowing – to maintain wellbeing and flourishing euphoria in the garden.