Restorative Garden Spaces: Can Sustainability Be Beautiful?

Lindsay Clark (Christine Jones)
Department of Languages & Literature
University of Utah

During the summer of 2006, Professor Christine Jones and I conducted research on sites in Tour, France which is located in the Loire Valley or the 'garden of France.' Our intention was to gain a better understanding of the French garden by physically participating in and interacting with the environment as well as performing archival research on plans and design history. Our hypothesis responded to the question, is there a common ground for classical garden designs and sustainable landscapes? We hoped to find examples of classical design as well as sustainable principles at work in the Loire Valley. In fact, there remain only a few examples of classical landscape architecture in the valley, it abounds in uniquely designed garden spaces that manifest or hide, but are indeed informed by, principles of sustainability.

The following list details the garden sites we researched and visited:
1) Middle Ages: Abbey of St. Julien- abbatial vegetable and meditation gardens
2) Renaissance: Château de Villandry- parterre vegetable gardens (renovated)
3) 17th Century: Chenonceau- Classical French garden
4) 18th Century: Château de la Chartonnière- mix of styles, English influence
5) 19th Century: Jardin des Prébendes- urban garden space, orientalism, English garden
6) 20th/21st Century: Château de Valmer- classically designed organic vegetable garden

Our Classical garden research revealed the aesthetic "rules" of beauty in design, while several unique gardens of the valley manifest a "sustainable" ethic. The French geometric, aesthetic, and is extreme in its control of the landscape and its representation. As Michel Bardon explains in his text Les Jardins, paysagistes, jardiniers, poetess, "aesthetic pleasure is no longer born as it had been in the Middle Ages of the contemplation of flowers that we admire for their form, color, symbolic meaning or perfume. It is born instead of the combination of these pleasures with the intellectual enjoyment we experience when we see nature enriched by the order we impose on it."

Exploring Classical French gardens, such as Chenonceau, illuminated how today we might approach the land in this way, from an intellectual perspective and not simply from a sensual or emotional response. The aesthetic principle of the classical garden subordinates to a certain extent sensual pleasure to imaginative and rational reflection. Drawing on this principle, we can put 21st century science into a similar relationship with the landscape; deriving the aesthetic, even ethic, of the sustainable garden from the application of new science to the disposition and cultivation of the land.

Using the urban and royal garden sites of the Loire Valley as our case studies, we also explored sustainability at once economic, social, and environmental. Several sites beautifully illustrated aesthetic sustainability in action: Villandry, la Chartonnière, and Valmer. Walking through Valmer, a classically designed vegetable garden, one sees, feels, and understands the fusion of design principles with the 21st-century organic ethic. The pleasure is sensual and at the same time ethically responsible to the land. It is living example of the common ground between human manipulation and respect for the natural world.