

PREMIUM

It's a new day, autumn is coming to visit

Irises in every hue: a kaleidoscope of colour in an idyllic Swiss chateau



The multitude of colours seen in the iris fields of Château de Vuillerens, near Lausanne



Robert Bovey, the owner of Château de Vuillerens, in the Jura Canton of Switzerland, tells the story of taking a smart lady on a tour of the chateau's three acres of iris fields. "Suddenly she stopped in front of a very bright yellow iris and she said 'what is that called?' Bovey sent for a catalogue – each iris is carefully recorded by its row and position, and, with 400 varieties planted, he could be forgiven for not having its name at the tip of his tongue. "I opened the catalogue and said: "It is called 'Carolina Gold'. Her answer was: 'you are definitely too smooth for me!' Why? Because it was Princess Caroline of Monaco and her mother called her Carolina. What are the chances of that?"

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By Alex Thomas

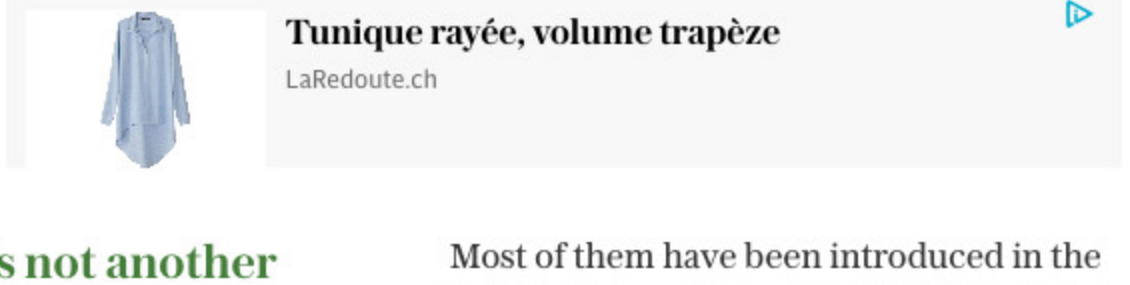
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Like Princess Caroline, the smooth-talking Bovey's mother Doreen was American and it was she who first planted an iris collection in the grounds of the chateau in 1950, opening the field to the public in 1955. In 1963, Bovey, now 75, inherited the 250-acre estate and has carried on the tradition, adding new varieties every year to make it the largest collection in Europe. "There is not another flower I can think of that has this endless combination of colours," he enthuses – although bright red has always eluded the breeders.

Following his mother, he sources his stock largely from [Schreiner's nursery](#) in Oregon (neatly, Schreiner himself was Swiss), which specialises in breeding blousy, big-headed bearded varieties with frilly petals that remind one of the layers of a Wild West showgirl's petticoats. "If you look at the Schreiner's catalogue, you will see very few irises from before 1980.

Most of them have been introduced in the last 15 year or so," says Bovey. "The whole shape of the flower has changed: the flowers are much bigger; they have this ruffled effect, the sepals are ruffled and there are more flowers per stalk." Bovey's favourites are the amoenas, which have pale standards (upper petals) and darker falls (lower), such as 'Miles Ahead' (white/blue-edged), 'Scuddie Lovers' (white/gold and russet) and 'They're Waa' (white/yellow). Or the reverse: 'Brussels' (violet/white) and 'Alpenview' (pale blue/white).



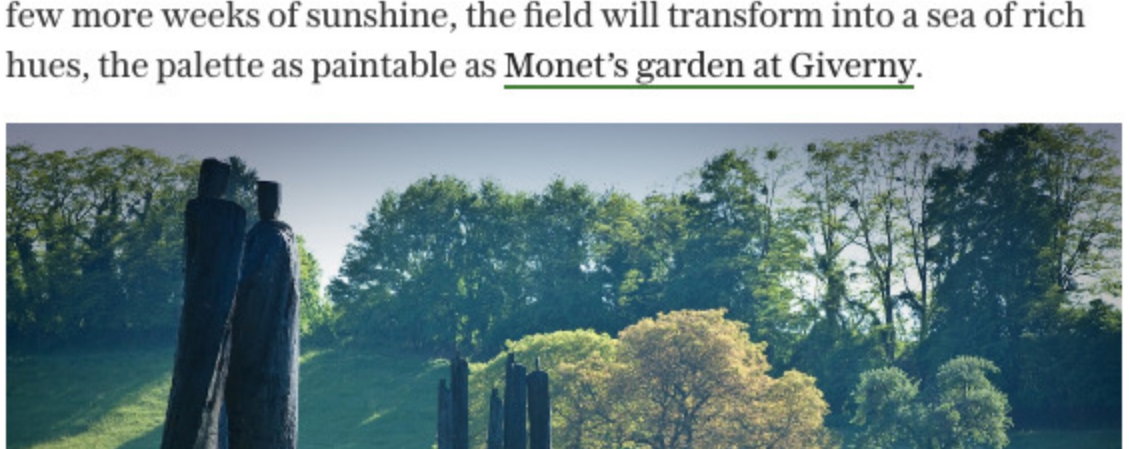
“There is not another flower I can think of that has this endless combination of colours”

As I walk through the fields – which are rotated on a three-year basis – the week before opening, with the tinkle of cowbells floating over the spring air from the neighbouring pasture, only a few pale blue early dwarf varieties are showing their colour on the sloping site. Within a few more weeks of sunshine, the field will transform into a sea of rich hues, the palette as paintable as Monet's garden at Giverny.



COURT: ROSE COLOMBE

The showgirls are not the only irises strutting their stuff here, though. As I walk through the fields – which are rotated on a three-year basis – the week before opening, with the tinkle of cowbells floating over the spring air from the neighbouring pasture, only a few pale blue early dwarf varieties are showing their colour on the sloping site. Within a few more weeks of sunshine, the field will transform into a sea of rich hues, the palette as paintable as Monet's garden at Giverny.



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First come the dwarfs, then intermediates; followed by border, I. siberica and the garden I. germanica. In high summer 13,500 daylilies take over the display, with repeat-flowering irises bring up the rear from August until late autumn.

Bovey is rather taken with these new varieties, such as the aptly named white 'Immortality' or the dusky terracotta 'Dutch Chocolate', which he has been introducing over the past 10 years or so. The problem – or perhaps pleasurable surprise – is, one never quite knows when they are going to do it. "We've had irises in flower in November."



COURT: ROSE COLOMBE

Vuillerens has been in Bovey's family for 700 years, one of the few privately owned chateaux in Switzerland, and one of even fewer that open their gates to the public. Unlike in Britain, garden visiting is not a traditional pastime in Switzerland, a nation of only nine million, although Bovey, who works as an international financial advisor, would like to change this, and to appeal to a wider audience. While the iris fields are a famous attraction, bringing in 15,000 visitors over the seven weeks the garden is open (see box), formerly there was little else to see.

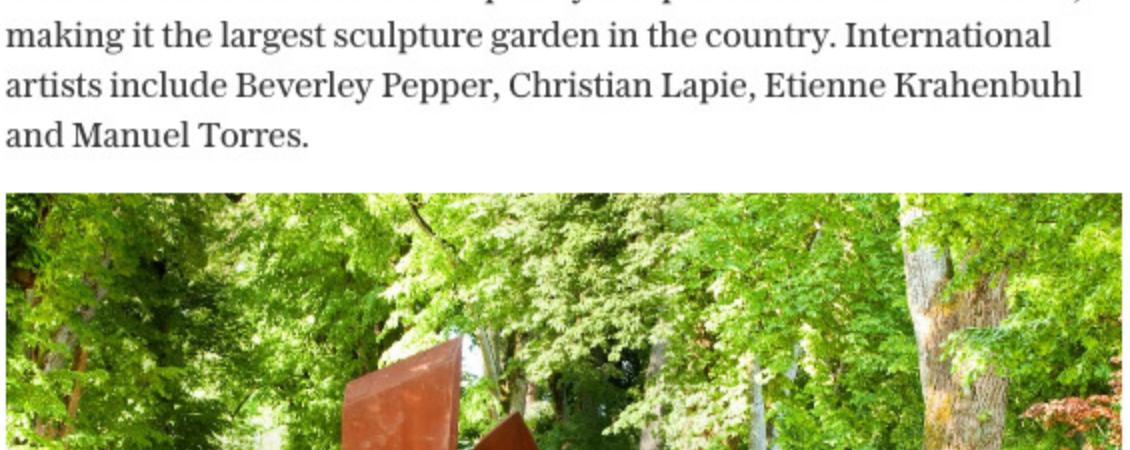
Step in John Butledge, an English designer who has been working with Bovey for the past 10 years, developing new gardens to explore. "Originally you came in, saw the irises and walked out. So we are just trying to diversify a bit," he says. Among his introductions are a woodland plantation full of rhododendrons, growing on a 3ft bed of imported acid soil, named after Daria, Bovey's late sister.



COURT: ROSE COLOMBE

Each area is named after someone important to the life of the chateau – a new shady garden under the trees is named after Butledge's 11-year-old daughter Bummy; Doranne, Bovey's late wife has a geometric rose garden on the lower terrace, designed by Bovey's former Brazilian girlfriend Silvana. Even Silvana's Yorkshire terrier Muni is honoured with a colourful area, including tulips and hydrangeas. "My total love was Muni, so when he died in tragic circumstances John and I came up with the idea of creating a new garden," says Bovey.

A box-lined formal Chateaux garden is filled with tulips, repeat-flowering roses and irises, and a central pergola covered in Laburnum x watereri 'Vossii' and hybrid clematis. Here and elsewhere are examples of Bovey's collection of contemporary sculpture – more than 70 so far, making it the largest sculpture garden in the country. International artists include Beverley Pepper, Christian Lapie, Etienne Krahenbuhl and Manuel Torres.



COURT: ROSE COLOMBE

Dorothy Cross's beautiful ghostly white Bed, carved from one piece of Carrara marble, has arrived the week before, but from an exhibition at the New Art Centre in Salisbury, Wiltshire – "my tomb", jokes Bovey. My visit coincides with the British sculptor Laura Ford, who is there to install her work, Fat Cats. Both pieces are sited on the lower terrace in front of the chateau, which is open to the public for the first time this year.

This will allow visitors to enjoy the far-reaching views down to Lake Geneva and the Alps beyond. Bovey can see all this from his bedroom window, although a pylon bang in front of Mont Blanc riles him – not as much as the fortified tower that blocked a 19th-century ancestor's view of the mountain, so she had it decapitated. What was left of it is still there, covered by a climbing rose.



COURT: ROSE COLOMBE

Access to the terrace will also give visitors a chance to see the fine front of the house, built in the early 18th century, and to admire the magnificent tulip tree beside it, brought over from Virginia and planted in about 1739. In case it dies, Bovey has had it cloned and the younger tree grows nearby, ready to take over.

Other places to explore include a secret garden in the former moat, filled with scented plants, and a new path through an "enchanted forest" of woodland at the end of the quarter-mile-long Allée Cavalière of centuries-old elms, chestnut, acacia and beech that originally connected the chateau with another family home.

How to grow bearded irises

The best time to plant is from July-September, to give the roots time to establish before winter. Choose a sunny spot with well-drained soil, in a raised bed or embankment if possible, to aid drainage. Do not bury the rhizomes as they need to get a baking in summer, so make sure some of their upper surface is exposed. Space them 10-20in (30cm-50cm) apart; it will look a bit sparse in the first year but should soon fill up. Thin every three-four years; crowded clumps will produce fewer flowers.

Also a first, visitors can now explore the former wine cellars in the original 14th-century parts of the chateau. The domaine produces about 40,000 bottles of wine a year in vineyards that have been there since medieval times and were expanded by Bovey in 1974. Neatly, his dual inheritances are celebrated on Vuillerens's wine label, which bears not only a sketch of the house but a depiction of irises in full flower. Each vintage is marked by a different iris, too: the winner of that year's Lyden Medal of Honour, the highest accolade awarded by the American Iris Society.



COURT: ROSE COLOMBE

Bovey is keen to attract a more international audience. "John has done an unbelievable job because we didn't really have anybody who knew what we were doing – meaning me – so we were stumbling along. Now we are professional and we have got this sculpture collection in place. He has elevated this garden to a completely new level and we have something we could use as a must-see destination because it is really fantastic." Butledge has an even higher ambition. "The ultimate aim is to make the best garden in Switzerland. That is what we are on about."

How to get there

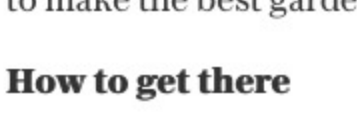
The gardens at Château de Vuillerens are open until June 17, 10am-6pm, then 2pm-5pm until July 28. They are also open September 28-30 and October 5-7, 10am-4pm. Entry CHF5 (£1), children 11-16 CHF3 (£3.65), under 11 free. For more details visit [jardinsdesiris.ch](#).

The chateau is about an hour's drive northeast along the shores of Lake Geneva from central Geneva, half an hour northwest from Lausanne. Trains from central Geneva run frequently to Morges, and take half an hour. Trains from Lausanne to Morges are frequent; the journey takes about 12 minutes. The hourly 780 bus takes 10 minutes to the village of Vuillerens, return tickets about £8.20. For both timetables, visit [ghb.ch](#).

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