



BETWEEN THE LINES

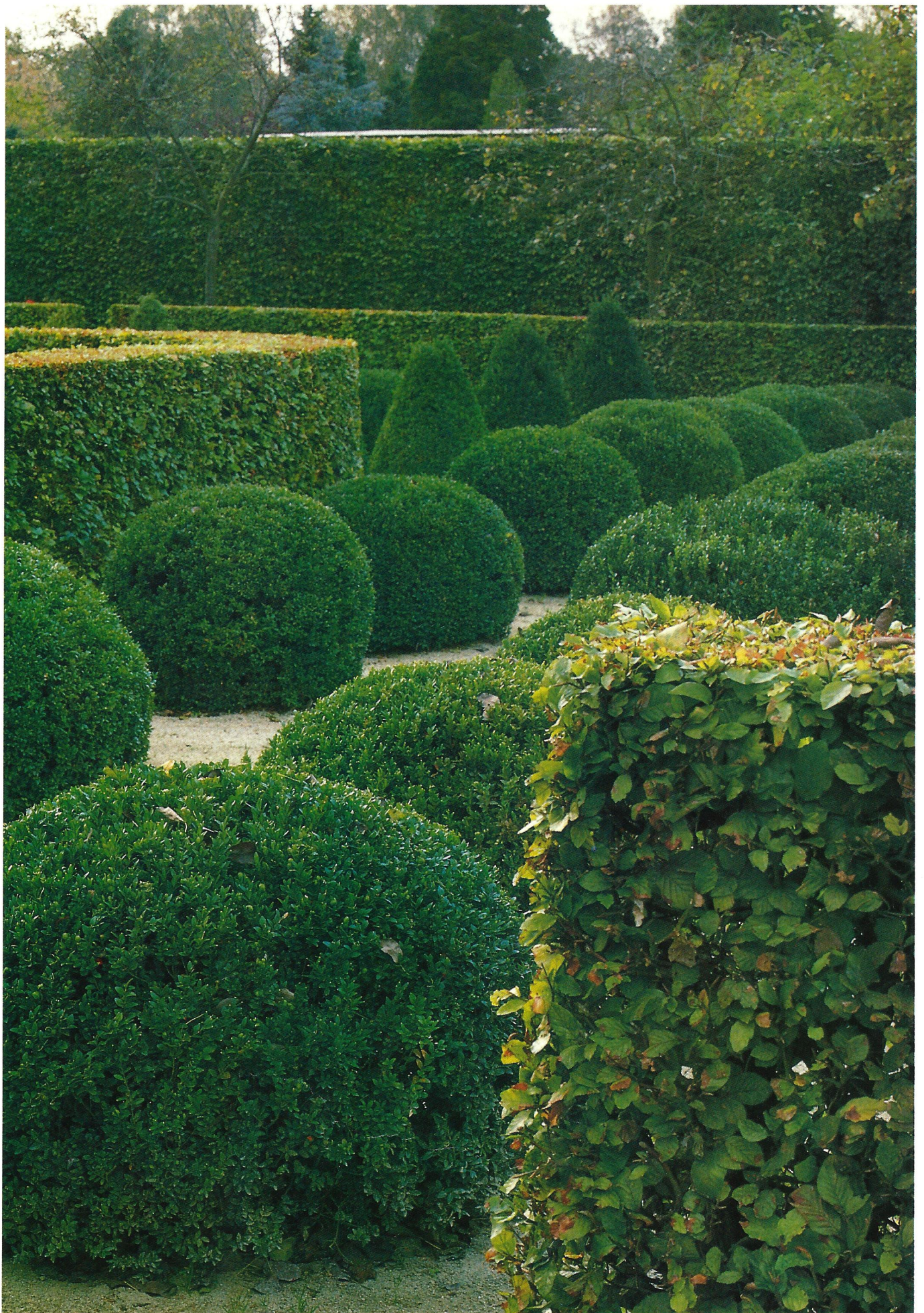
Symmetry and a sense of fun are the essential ingredients in Belgian landscape architect Marc De Winter's garden. Isabelle Van Groeningen visits him at his family home in rural Flanders *Photographs by Elke Borkowski*

It is easy to miss Marc De Winter's typically Flemish farmhouse as you drive through picturesque wooded countryside towards Halle, 20 miles east of Antwerp. Two clipped box domes at the base of some plane trees along the road are the only real signs of civilisation. But the delightful ivy-clad house where Marc grew up – built by his grandparents 100 years ago, and where he and his wife now work and bring up a young family – is a hive of activity.

Marc's wife, Greet, has been running 'Bloem-Bloem', a flower shop, from the family home since 1984. In the mornings, you will often find them both outside the house, standing beside the flower lorry which brings the delivery of freshly-cut blooms from the

market. The cut flowers on these continental delivery lorries are usually arranged by colour rather than by species, and this is very much the way Marc De Winter approaches the use of colour in his house and garden, as well as in his commissioned garden designs. He is more like an artist, using colour sparingly from a palette, than a gardener with a catalogue of colourful plants. "It's not important for me to know which species of gentian is growing in the pots on the table outside the window, as long as they are the right shade of blue," he explains. The interior of the house is monochromatic – the sitting room, where they relax in the evenings, is a stark white, while the day room, with large windows overlooking the garden, is dark.

Above: clean lines and neatly clipped beech hedges are the hallmark of Marc De Winter's half-acre garden around the old farmhouse. Opposite: an outdoor children's playground is concealed behind one of four beech enclosures, with sculptured box made more dramatic by a ground-covering of white dolomite stone.





In the garden, the sparing use of colour is repeated. Marc's preference is for a green garden with a few flowers to provide a dab of colour here and a touch there. "Often, it is not the flowers that create the feature in a garden, but the people who are in it," he says. Colour is not the only link with art here. Strongly influenced by sculptors and painters, Marc is a collector of abstract art – favouring such painters as the Dutch-born Bram Bogart – and it is not uncommon to find the garden given over to a sculpture exhibition.

Although the house is always busy, it has a peaceful aura. Half of the ground floor is taken up by the flower shop, while Marc's studio fills half the space upstairs. The remaining area is their living space, which they share with their three young children, Enzo (ten), Zoë (eight) and Otto (six).

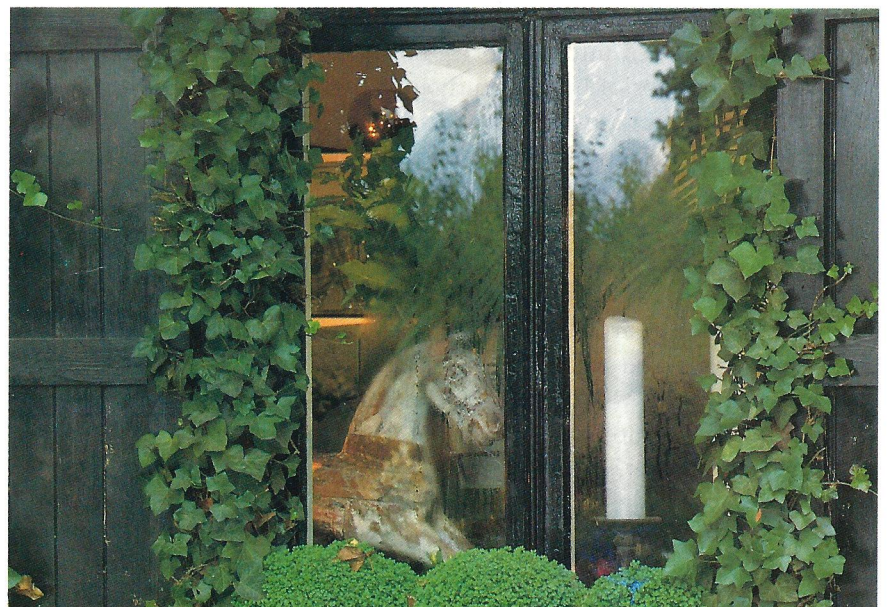
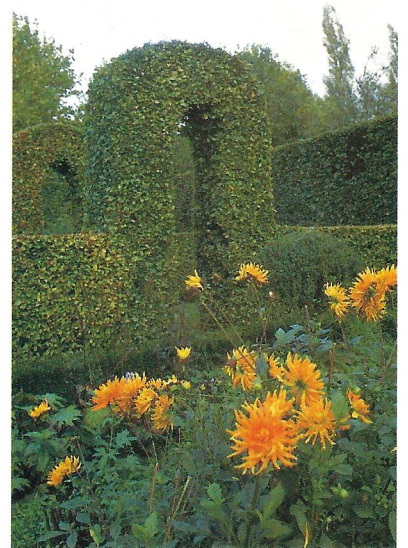
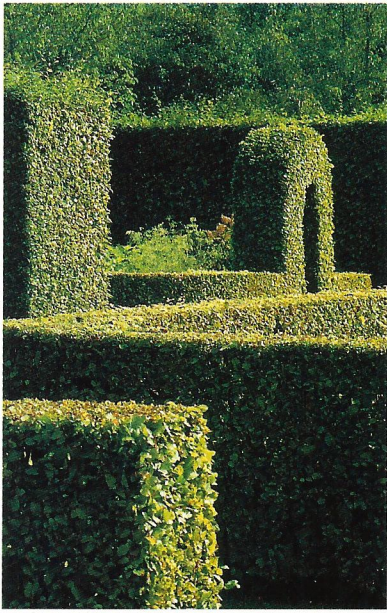
However secluded the front of their house may seem, the back is very open – large windows look out onto the garden, with more 'windows' cut into the hedge to provide views of the fields beyond. Approximately half an acre in size, the garden has been designed as an extension of the house, centred on a series of four 'rooms'. Walking around the garden, you become aware

of the distinctly different atmospheres emanating from each of these spaces. The most abstract of the rooms features rigidly clipped box cones complemented by sculptures by Camiel van Breedam, the ground covered in crushed white dolomite stone. Surprisingly, this room is also used as an outdoor playroom for the children – blending perfectly into the surrounding gravel is a sandpit filled with pure white sand, its edges undefined. The rigid box forms make it an ideal place for a game of hide-and-seek.

Other rooms reflect the character of the old farmhouse. One is designed with the traditional peasant garden in mind, with box-edged beds filled with flowers, herbs and vegetables. It is dominated by an old well with a huge wooden lever to draw up the water. The planting in these beds changes from year to year; Marc likes to use them as trial grounds, experimenting with different plant and colour combinations.

Closest to the house is a brick terrace, with a large table, where the family can enjoy the warm, sunny days outside. On the terrace are dozens of rustic, terracotta pots, filled with plants. The most eye-catching of these are the topiary birds, made from box, grown as standards

Above: iron sculptures made by the Flemish sculptor Camiel Van Breedam complement the regimented rows of box. Opposite top: beech hedges reflect and accentuate the architectural details of the house; Marc De Winter with his topiary birds. Middle: an old well with a huge wooden lever dominates the vegetable and herb garden; fiery orange dahlias mix with herbs and vegetables in box-edged beds. Bottom: one of Marc's three children with Idéfix, the family dog; an ivy-framed window with mounds of fresh green soleirolia in pots beneath.





in large tubs. “I love these birds,” Marc says, “because they provide a humorous element to the garden.” Continuing the ornithological theme, and providing a wonderful link between inside and out, he has amassed a collection of antique wooden birds on the window-sill of the day room. Back in the garden, another element of fun is provided by a large scarecrow with broomstick arms and bird-box head – an interesting contradiction!

Marc acknowledges that the main feature of his garden is the farmhouse itself, and he is a strong believer in letting the architectural genius of the place guide him in his designs. All the paths are lined up on the doors and windows of the house, and he has successfully extended the garden into the surrounding countryside by planting hedges of beech, indigenous to the area. The hedges reflect and accentuate the architectural details of the farmhouse – an arched entrance through a beech hedge to one of the garden rooms mirrors an arched window. All of Marc’s designs have a strong formality and an architectural structure, with straight hedges and clipped box cones the dominant elements. “This structure guarantees interest and variety right through the year,” he says with conviction.

Asked by clients whether his style of garden design is massively labour intensive, Marc replies: “Mowing a

lawn once a week is time consuming and tedious, while vegetable plots and flower borders require a lot of regular attention. By contrast, the hedges and topiary forms that feature centrally in my designs only need trimming occasionally.” The tall, beech hedges are trimmed once a year, and the lower ones surrounding the garden rooms have to be cut twice a year to keep them low enough to look into the spaces. The box domes get one hard clip at the beginning of the season to keep them in shape, followed by a second light trim at the end to tidy them up again. If his clients fear they cannot cope, he suggests they hire a maintenance contractor to come in for a few days a year to do the trimming. “After all,” he smiles, “people spend money on hiring someone to help with the housework – why should a garden be different?”

Like all Marc’s designs, his garden is a space where grown-ups and children are equally welcome. If he ever has the opportunity, he would like to start all over again, enhancing the element of fun and play. “I’m sure I would make it much more naughty,” he concludes. ☞

Marc De Winter, Driesheide 52, 2980 Halle, Zoersel, Belgium. Marc runs garden design courses from home, at BF10,000 for 10 lessons. Bloem-Bloem is open Wed-Sat, 9-12 & 1.30-7 and Sun, 9-2. Tel (00 32) 3383 0041.

Above: one of Marc De Winter’s humorous touches. This scarecrow, standing beside the well-head in the vegetable garden, has a bird-house head and broomstick arms. Opposite: birds inside and out – the topiary birds on the terrace are mirrored by a collection of antique wooden birds on the window-sill inside.

