THE ART OF GARDENS, PLANTS AND FLOWERS

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## FIELD OF DREAMS

From fashion designer to flower grower Masami-Charlotte Lavault has transformed an overgrown plot in a Parisian cemetery into the French capital's first floricultural farm

> Words – Janice Morton Photographs – Valery Rizzo

STROLLING PAST THE GRAVESTONES and tombs in Paris'
Belleville cemetery, the last thing you would expect to find in this
sombre space is a field of flowers bursting with colour and life.

Pein Air is the city's first flower farm, France's first urban one and the brainchild of Parisienne Masami-Charlotte Lavault, 32, former industrial designer. The 1,200sq m plot – roughly the size of an Olympic swimming pool – is perched high on a hill in the 30th arrondissement beside the rue du Télégraphe (named for Caude Chappe's semaphore system, which was tested out there).

pew up in Paris with little access to nature, except for visits to park or my grandparents in the country, so my connection to plants and animals was initially more intellectual than experiential, plains Lavault. 'My way into farming was really a reaction to an erdose of urban life and materialism.' After studying in Vienna and at Central Saint Martins, Lavault stayed in London and found be designing fashion accessories. 'Life in the city was hard work and creating designs for mass production was unsatisfying. I realised that I had to leave London and the job, and do something that was exactly the opposite.

big difference was that in farming you don't use up resources, try to maintain and protect the environment,' she says. So, on whim, with no agricultural experience, Lavault applied for a job a biodynamic farm in Morocco — it was January and the idea some winter sun appealed. 'To my surprise, they said yes. The grew mainly vegetables but also some medicinal plants to sell locally. I learned a lot in my three months there, but being a single some in Morocco wasn't always easy. So I left and went to work a biodynamic farm in Herefordshire. The boss there didn't think was up to heavy fieldwork and assigned me to look after the

flowers. I was disappointed at first but soon loved it. It was hard work, but my three months there confirmed that no matter what the weather, I loved farming."

By then Lavault had been away from France for about 10 years and felt it was time to return. 'I thought I'd just go back to Paris, find a plot and farm, but it wasn't that easy. I struggled to find a site and decided that it wasn't "my time", so I headed off to Okinawa in Japan to work for a few months at Sunshine Farm.' The farm grows tropical fruit and vegetables and is a pilot project of the Effective Micro-organisms Research Organisation, which experiments with using effective micro-organisms (EM, a blend of bacteria and fermenting fungi) to improve soil quality and plant yield. 'I learned how they prepared and used these 'magic potions' and that really changed my way of thinking about farming. I brought some EM back to Paris to create my own versions to use here.'

Back in Paris, Lavault again searched for a plot for her dream flower farm – and struck lucky. In 2016, the Mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, set up Parisculteurs, a project focused on reclaiming urban wasteland, greening the built environment and developing urban agriculture. 'Every year for three years, Parisculteurs offered 30 sites for professional urban farming projects. I applied for a plot with two other non-profit organisations – Pépins Production and Interface Formation – and got Belleville,' Lavault explains. Other Parisculteurs' projects include a 2,500 sq m vegetable garden on top of the roof of the Opéra Bastille and a 14,000 sq m plot, Europe's largest urban farm, on the roof of Paris Expo's Pavilion 6.

'We didn't get access to the site until autumn 2017,' Lavault says. 'We pay rent and the water bills – Parisculteurs provided the water supply. We have the plot on a 10-year lease, renewable once.' The first season was devoted to clearing the site, preparing the soil using

effective micro-organisms, building greenhouses and an irrigation system, and setting up several thousand plants. 'At the start, Plein Air was just a blank piece of ground with six trees, which I kept. The plot used to be a communal grave but the council removed all the bodies in the 1990s, so for the last 20 years it has been just grass and lots of weeds, especially quackgrass, which I had to remove by hand. I also took out about eight tonnes of stones, sand and gravel — that built up my muscles. Clearing the plot took me about 18 months but, in the meantime, I had to grow and sell my flowers. So I went bed by bed, clearing, cultivating, harvesting and selling, and over that time, I managed to grow flowers over the whole site. I did this largely on my own with occasional help from friends and volunteers.'

The cultivation methods Lavault employs at Plein Air are based on minimum input and no till; no pesticides, insecticides, chemical fertilisers or compost are used, just the EM blends and some hay, and all the flowers are grown from seed. 'At Plein Air, everything is done by hand,' she explains. 'Slowness is not slowness, it's just accepted as the time needed for things and people.

'I started planting in the fall, a lot of bulbs — paperwhites and tulips were my first harvest. It was hot in April 2018 and they all bloomed at once, so I harvested them quickly but had no idea who would buy them. I cycled around Paris with a mini trailer of flowers but no one really wanted them,' she explains. 'Selling the flowers has been a process of trial and error. At first, I sold directly to florists; some bought a lot, but most of the profit went to them rather than back into the farm. So I then started selling to individuals, who would come to the field, choose their flowers and I'd make them up a bouquet. Then I decide to pre-harvest everything and sell it on the farm, which was easier but nerve-wracking because I was never sure how many people would come to buy my flowers. Now, during the Covid-19 pandemic, I'm pre-selling everything on the website — and people pick up their order from the farm. Now demand exceeds supply.'

Lavault grows more than 200 varieties of flowers, chosen for their beauty, scent, longevity and compatibility with the Parisian climate. 'I don't really have a favourite flower, 'she says. 'Most take about nine months from seed to bouquet, but some can take up to two years, so when they arrive I'm happy to see them — whoever they are, they're like an old friend. Growing so many varieties is a lot of extra work but it's fun and better for the soil.' In addition to classic blooms such as roses, zinnias and chrysanthemums, Lavault grows tomatoes, basil, strawberries and giant amaranths to include in her floral arrangements,

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'making them very different from what you would find in your averaflorists' bouquet', she says. Harvesting is done sustainably too – planare cut with shorter stems and selectively to ensure a continuous growth of flowers.

'On the outskirts of Paris, we have Rungis, a huge wholesale flower market, where you can find almost any flower throughout the year so to stand out I've started growing flowers in unusual colours and of course, our flowers have the added advantage of being locally grown,' Lavault says. Over 85 per cent of the flowers bought today in conventional florists are flown in from countries such as Kenya, Ecuador and Ethiopia. These blooms may be low-priced but their true cost is hidden: the human cost – poor working conditions for women and children growing them, and the environmental – soil erosion, greenhouse gas emissions and chemical pollution. 'I've only ever grown flowers sustainably, and I wouldn't know or want to do any other way,' she confirms.

Looking to the future, Lavault hopes to keep renting the Belleville site but won't be expanding the business until she can stabilise its finances. She currently doesn't pay herself a wage but her side hust translating books from German and English to French pays for rent food. She also works one day a week as a flower expert on a farm in Normandy, which is owned by Jean-Martin Fortier, the French-Canadauthor of *The Market Gardener*, the bible for those setting up small-sorganic farms.

Creating Plein Air has certainly been a challenge for Lavault. 'The odds were stacked against me,' she explains. 'I'm a young, urban, half-French-half-Japanese woman. I had little money, no experience of farming or credibility when I started. Before I got the Plein Air site, I presented a similar project about five times to Parisculteurs but they said no again and again. I was often asked who was going to do all the physical work? Me, of course! When the Belleville site came up, I had the choice of doing it alone right then or waiting to find someone to work with. Doing it all alone has involved a lot of hard work, time and responsibility, but I've learned so much and made all my own choices

Since April, however, Lavault has had support with the farm's admin, website (pleinair.paris) and marketing from Anna Bauer. 'Anna is working to diversify what we offer. Before the coronavirus we held guided tours of the farm and bouquet-making sessions. If Covid-19 regulations allow it, we'd like to run more workshops to explain to people, especially urbanites, what flower farming is really like – the romantic notion versus the reality. In the current pandemic, people dream of different lives and lifestyles, but I think it's important for them to know what this really entails. Flower farming isn't for everyone,' she adds, 'but it is for me. After working in industrial design, it was an immense relief to give all my energy to something that doesn't last. For me, the beauty of flowers is that they are completely ephemeral.' •



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