

# What's growing at Château de Prangins

Located just outside Nyon, this former 18<sup>th</sup>-century château has become a branch of Switzerland's National Museum. And its kitchen garden, full of herbs and heirloom fruit and vegetables, is the largest such garden open to the public in French-speaking Switzerland. *Swiss News* takes a tour.

By Gail Mangold-Vine | Aerial photos depict its considerable charms best: perched atop lands that gently slope down to *Lac Léman* (Lake Geneva), with a tree-rich park *à l'anglaise* leading up to it, the Château de Prangins overlooks a symmetric sunken garden, organised in four main areas around a central fountain.

At first glance, with its wide pathways, box hedge borders and pleasing patterns of plants, you might think the garden was an 18<sup>th</sup>-century pleasure venue, designed for taking a stroll and enjoying the sound of buzzing bees, twittering birds and a splashing fountain, while revelling in scents, textures, colour and designs.

"And to some extent, it was just that,"

says Bernard Messerli, the horticulturist and ex-landscape gardener turned teacher, researcher and writer who is in charge of projects relating to the Château's garden.

## Then and now

Messerli points out that kitchen, or herb, gardens originated in monasteries – hence the cruciform layout. Yet monastery gardens, while sharing many similarities with the Château's, lack its generosity of scale.

"Monks made do with narrow little pathways, for example, whereas promenading ladies with big skirts needed more room," says Messerli.

He explains the Château's garden was a hybrid from the beginning: more kitchen garden at the outset, perhaps, then taking on attributes of the pleasure garden as the 18<sup>th</sup> century evolved. (The Château was built in 1730, but remained uninhabited until the second half of the century.)

"The garden you see today was designed and built in the late 1990s based on old prints depicting the way it was historically, but also with an eye to some of

our aims," Messerli says.

Some of those aims include trial-testing hybrids for the nearby Agroscope Changins-Wädenswil (ACW) research facility, and showcasing rare species for the association devoted to promulgating them, ProSpecieRara.

## A brief stroll

Covering 5,500 square meters (just over 59,000 square feet), the Château garden is surrounded by walls. Three of the walls serve as a backdrop to espaliered fruit trees: "pears, apples, apricots, plums, cherries – 30 varieties in all", says Messerli.

Aligned in front of the fourth wall are huge pots containing fig, pomegranate, almond, olive, laurel and mulberry trees.

"The Château never had an *orangerie*, into which you would move pots of citrus trees during the winter, but more for snobbish reasons than anything else there was a room inside the Château devoted to cultivating silkworms on mulberry trees. It was prestigious to wear garments made from one's own silk," Messerli expands.

Some berries, but mostly vegetables, herbs and flowers cover the four plots sur-

© All photos Château de Prangins



Clockwise from left: *Sept-en-Gueule*, or *Petit Muscat*, pears; Château de Prangins in early summer; *Iris variegata*; and peach blossoms



### About the Château de Prangins

Entirely refurbished and opened as a museum in 1998, the Château, located halfway between Geneva and Lausanne, has quite a past.

It was built in 1730 by Louis Guiguer, Baron de Prangins, a banker who conducted business in Paris, London, Amsterdam and Geneva. He and his wife never lived there, however, and bequeathed the Château to their nephew Jean-Georges Guiguer. Guiguer moved there in 1755, and the property remained in his family until 1814.

Briefly home in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to Joseph Bonaparte, Napoleon's elder brother and former King of Spain, the Château then became a boy's boarding school. The school closed its doors in 1919.

The Château's next owner, Horace de Pourtalès, restored it, and in 1930, it was bought by American heiress Katherine McCormick. She left it to the U.S. government in 1964, who deemed a project to convert it into an ambassador's residence too expensive, and sold it in 1970.

In 1974, after serving briefly as the residence of disgraced American financier Bernard Cornfeld, the Château was purchased jointly by the cantons of Vaud and Geneva. It was gifted to the federal government for use as a branch of the Swiss National Museum in 1975. Today, it houses rich permanent collections illustrating Swiss life and culture in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Temporary exhibits are also regularly organised at the Château, which offers a diverse programme of workshops and events – some of them in English, as well.



Argenteuil asparagus

rounding the fountain. Rare vegetables include many that are making a comeback today: cardoons, tuberous-rooted chervil, winter radish, yellow carrots and purple Vitelotte potatoes.

Alongside common cooking herbs like rosemary, thyme, sage and mint are the lesser-known borage, wormwood (from which absinthe is made), rue (an anti-spasmodic and calmative that can also induce abortions, according to Messerli) and St. John's Wort. The latter is used for healing oils, baths, tinctures, and even wines and teas – *millepertuis* or *Johanniskraut* teas are traditional remedies to help counter depression.

Flowers in the garden tend to be edible, like nasturtiums, or like the iris, which is valued for a variety of reasons – not least essential oil.

**Indulge the senses**

“May to November is the best time to visit the garden,” says Messerli. This is when nature abundantly rewards the untiring ef-

forts of head gardener André Primpier and his two helpers, each of whom puts in a solid two days a week of work in the garden year round.

To fully appreciate the garden's textures and scents, “visitors are welcome to gently touch or sniff, but plucking is out” Messerli says, recalling with amusement one enthusiastic lady who showed up with a basket she proceeded to try and fill.

Besides use in the Château restaurant's kitchen and during tastings on guided tours or kids' workshops, Messerli adds, formal avenues for marketing the garden's produce (or making products like sachets, or jam, from it) are largely unexplored as of yet.

The museum and gardens are open Tuesday through Sunday from 11:00 to 17:00. Adult entry tickets cost SFr 7, and children under 16 can enter free. For more information:

[www.chateaudeprangins.ch](http://www.chateaudeprangins.ch) and [www.prospecierara.ch](http://www.prospecierara.ch).