

THE GARDEN

January 2011 | £4.25 | www.rhs.org.uk



WINTER GARDEN DELIGHT
GUIDE TO USING PEAT-FREE COMPOST



THE WATERLILY MAGICIAN

January 2011 is the centenary of the death of Joseph Bory Latour-Marliac, to whom hardy, coloured waterlilies owe their origin.

Caroline Holmes assesses his breeding work



SARL LATOUR-MARLIAC

Joseph Bory Latour-Marliac (above) founded his waterlily nursery in 1875. His customers included the impressionist artist Claude Monet, renowned for his paintings of the plants. Latour-Marliac was awarded the Veitch Memorial Medal by the RHS in 1898

JOSEPH BORY LATOUR-MARLIAC, a botanist working in Lot-et-Garonne in southwest France, exhibited his plants at the 1889 Exposition Universelle, the 'World Fair' in Paris. Radiating from the Eiffel Tower, which had been built for the event, the exhibition was designed to celebrate French innovation. On 7 April of that year, Latour-Marliac wrote that he would despatch 17 hardy waterlily cultivars to Paris, 11 of which he had hybridised himself, to be displayed among the horticultural exhibits in the water gardens in front of the Trocadero. His hybrids were among the first non-white hardy cultivars in the world, and they entranced Claude Monet, who was exhibiting his paintings next door at the Pavillon des Artistes.

Four years later Monet bought the meadow below his house at Giverny, northwest of Paris, and created his famous *jardin d'eau*. Soon after, he placed his first order for waterlilies with Latour-Marliac. Monet would continue to paint these lilies for much of his life, while the nurseryman spent what remained of his, breeding and introducing 110 waterlilies.

Establishing the business

Born in Granges-sur-Lot in the Aquitaine region on 6 March 1830, Latour-Marliac went to Paris to study law as a young man, but the revolution of 1848 brought him home. He married in 1852. Managing the family's estates allowed him the freedom to undertake botanical experimentation. He founded the waterlily nursery in 1875, at Le Temple-sur-Lot, on 4 ha (10 acres) with two productive wells, a stream, and 14 springs.

He developed and grew his stock in elliptical ponds, raising new cuttings in shallow bowls. From the early 1880s he corresponded with Irish horticulturist and author of *The Wild Garden*, William Robinson. The growing fame of his plants meant he shipped them all over the world (by 1904, 75 percent of the nursery's business was from overseas, especially the UK), including to many well-known, aristocratic, even royal customers. Latour-Marliac died on 26 January 1911, aged 80.

The nursery continued to flourish as a wholesale concern under his daughter Angele, son-in-law Maurice Laydeker and their



ROBERT SHELDON

Nymphaea 'Marliacea Albida' (1880). Vigorous large, milk-white flowers, outer petals tinted pink. Well worth growing



ROBERT SHELDON

Nymphaea 'Odorata Sulfurea' (1879). Another classic waterlily, bearing mottled saffron-yellow flowers on long red stems

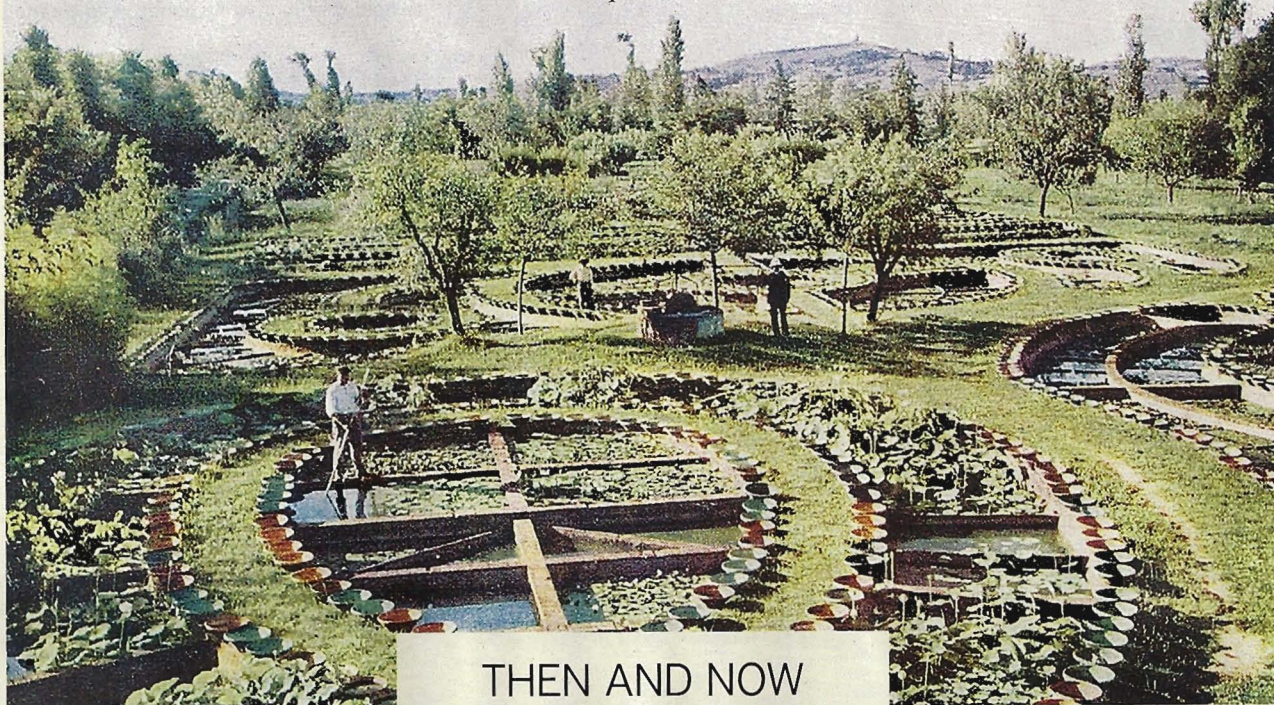


OLIVER MATHEWS

N. 'Marliacea Chromatella' (1877). The first, and arguably still the best-known, hardy yellow waterlily. A vigorous grower

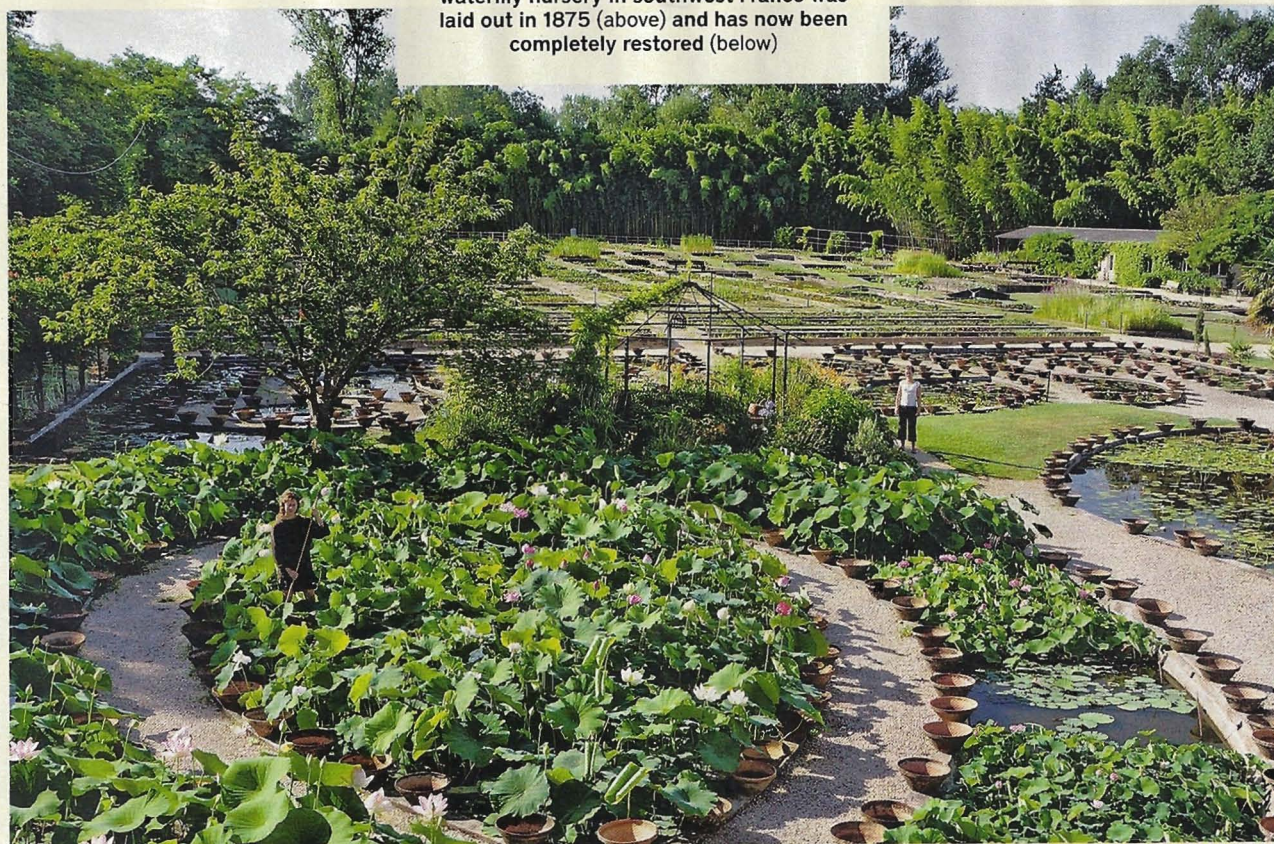
LATOUR - MARLIAC

Depuis 1875



THEN AND NOW

Fed by natural springs, Latour-Marliac's waterlily nursery in southwest France was laid out in 1875 (above) and has now been completely restored (below)



PAINTING-PHOTOGRAPHY-FRANCE

LATOUR-**M**ARLIAC
Depuis 1875

BOWLS OF BEAUTY

Latour-Marliac (with umbrella) and staff, photographed in the 19th century. He used the earthenware cooking pots to root cuttings and to hold rhizomes while ponds were cleaned



WATER WORLD

A present-day view of Etablissements Latour-Marliac, looking across the lake. The glasshouse is home to giant waterlilies and night-blooming tropical waterlilies

SARL LATOUR-MARLIAC / PAINTING-PHOTOGRAPHY-FRANCE

descendents through the 20th century into the 1980s. In the 1990s, Ray and Barbara Davies, then owners of Stapeley Water Gardens, a British aquatic plant nursery, saved the nursery from closure, adding new features and opening it to the public. Current owner Robert Sheldon bought it in 2007 (see panel, right).

Breeding secrets?

Early on, Latour-Marliac specialised in bamboo, introducing many species and cultivars to Europe, but his fame lies in the hardy waterlilies he hybridized in multiple colours, shapes and sizes. Using species from Sweden, France, America and China, he is said to have developed a method of cross-pollination that rendered seedlings sterile. His methods have not yet been rediscovered, but later breeders accept that he introduced only sterile cultivars so that others could not breed from them. However, he shared his pollination methods in a paper he presented to the RHS in 1898.

The first hardy yellow waterlily, *Nymphaea* 'Marliacea Chromatella', with sulphur-yellow stamens and a chestnut-marbled leaf surface, arose from *N. alba*, common European white waterlily, and North American *N. mexicana* (then *N. flava*), a small subtropical yellow. From further north in the USA (Cape Cod), Latour-Marliac imported a rare red-flowered form of fragrant waterlily, *N. odorata* f. *rubra*, using it as pollen parent and *N. alba* as seed parent to achieve the delicate pink tones of *N. 'Odorata Exquisita'* (1878), *N. 'Marliacea Carneae'* (1879) and *N. 'Marliacea Roseae'* (1887).

All Latour-Marliac's letters, orders and detailed growing instructions survive in the nursery archives, a fascinating insight into his passion and status.

Exclusive clientele

William Robinson founded his magazine *The Garden* in 1871; Latour-Marliac was featured in it, contributing articles from 1888 onward. The 44th volume (1894) was dedicated to 'Mons. B. Latour-Marliac, who has brought the lovely colours and forms of the waterlilies of the East to the waters of the North'. Britain became Latour-Marliac's best market, and good customers sometimes had a waterlily named in their honour, such as *N. 'Robinsonii'* (1895) and *N. 'James Hudson'* (1912), named for the head gardener of waterlily enthusiast Leopold de Rothschild at Gunnersby Park. Other customers included Amos Perry, Thomas Mawson, Gertrude Jekyll and the Veitch and Kelways nurseries. Recipients outside France included the Russian novelist Tolstoy, US landscape designers the Olmsted brothers, J. Yoshida in Japan, the King of Bulgaria, and the Vatican.

Monet's love affair with waterlilies continued. Robert Sheldon believes that, as he saw his plants fill out, Monet realised that the colourful dematerialising of the surface of his water 'mirror' made a unique landscape of breathtaking beauty and originality that only he could paint. Last year a customer requested that all the cultivars Monet had ordered be shipped to her in Maryland, an expensive undertaking with express shipping and customs. She insisted, despite the proximity of two of the biggest waterlily nurseries in the USA. Why such extravagance? Because she specifically wanted plants nurtured in the same waters, and under the same skies, as those of the waterlily master, and his artist. ■

Caroline Holmes is an author and writer who specialises in garden history

LATOUR-MARLIAC'S NURSERY TODAY

In 2007, Robert Sheldon took over Etablissements Latour-Marliac. Robert had started building garden ponds aged 12 and is passionate about waterlilies, and also about business (he holds an MBA, has taught at the Sorbonne, and is currently completing a PhD in Organisation Science).

Robert first revamped the mail-order business, rebuilt the nursery's stock, and created a new website (in French and English). As in Latour-Marliac's day, he is focusing sales efforts on individual gardeners and estates who appreciate quality and customer care, rather than on wholesale clients such as garden centres.

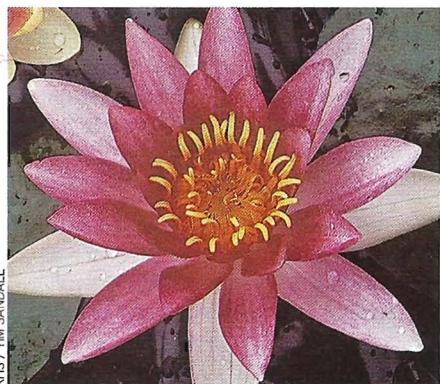
Latour-Marliac is now the third most visited tourist site in the Lot-et-Garonne department. The exhibition and growing pools here make up one third of a 3ha (7½ acre) park with pond, waterfall, glasshouse, Japanese bridge, museum, and a café.

RHS / TIM SANDALL



i Etablissements Latour-Marliac, Le Bourg, 47110 Le Temple-sur-Lot, France. Tel (from UK): 0033 (0)5 53 01 08 05; at UK local rates: 01245 808990. Website: www.latour-marliac.co.uk
 ● Le Temple-sur-Lot is about 80 miles southeast of Bordeaux

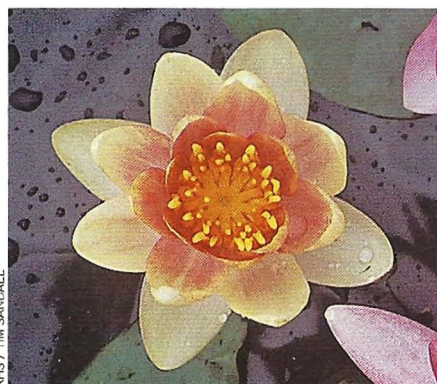
i Further reading Caroline Holmes' latest book, *Impressionists in Their Gardens – living light and colour*, will be published at the end of February by the Antique Collectors' Club, price £25, ISBN 9781851496532



Nymphaea 'Laydekeri Purpurata' (1895). With pinkish-red flowers and pale flecking on the petals, it adapts well to most ponds



N. 'Pygmaea Helvola' (1879). A perfect miniature yellow, with mottled leaves, so small it can be grown in a goldfish bowl



N. 'Aurora' (1895). Although it first flowers a bright apricot-yellow, its colour deepens to burgundy red after a few days