

terracing up the hill, with the help of her gardening friend Janette Coleman. ‘*Arbutus andrachnoides* doesn’t mind the wind and has a wonderful cinnamon-coloured trunk. The ones we have put in are already shooting up,’ she says, ‘and I want to have parasol pines, so we will have to make sure there is enough good earth there. They don’t burn as badly as the Aleppo pines (*Pinus halepensis*).’ (Indeed, it was the Aleppo cones that spread the fire damage in the garden, as, when they were alight, they flew through the air like fireworks.)

Last winter there was an exceptionally hard frost, which has added to the damage in the garden – the lovely big shady mulberry on the terrace was so badly affected by the combined effects of fire and frosts that it will probably have to go, and Spender lost a precious fremontodendron. ‘I have brought another one from London,’ she says, not to be defeated. ‘And I am just havoring about where to put it, whether it is going to be too exposed.’

She drives down to Provence from England, carting many of the plants in the back of the car. In the garden around a raised pond, the roses have been brought over from Peter Beales’s nursery in Norfolk. ‘It used to be nothing but ‘Super Star’ and ‘Peace’ in the nurseries here, although there are one or two places where you can buy shrub roses now.’

Despite having little experience when she first arrived at St Jérôme in the 1960s, she was determined to have a garden there, and did her homework thoroughly – Stephen may have loved the garden, but it was always her project. ‘I just sat around looking at the site,’ she says. ‘Harold Nicolson was still alive then, and he told me that they had waited four years before they decided on the axis of the garden at Sissinghurst. I went around to see the plants that did well in the wild – I went quite far afield, to the limestone uplands in the Gard and Languedoc and to the Luberon. I thought of the cultivars of the species that did well in the wild.’

Spender decided to eschew the formality of grander houses in the area. The pomegranate hedge in the rose garden, for instance, is left unclipped. ‘I don’t really like those tailored hedges,’ she confesses. ‘For one thing, the whole idea here is to merge the garden into the countryside. And the area is so beautiful that anything formal would look rather ridiculous.’ So, for example, lavenders planted at the garden’s edge mirror the grey foliage of the olives beyond.

Although when she is not at Mas St Jérôme the house is looked after by guests and house-sitters, she can’t really expect them to spend their days tending the garden; so Spender’s approach of making sure she uses plants that are thoroughly suited to the surroundings also works well in maintenance terms. ‘If you plant the natural things, they are going to be happy.’ Not that this stops her considering new additions to the garden. ‘I am too old to have love affairs,’ she laughs, ‘so I have love affairs with plants. Sometimes I can think of nothing else.’

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*Natasha Spender died on 21 October 2010, aged ninety-one, having been too frail to garden at the Mas St Jérôme for the last three or four years of her life. The property has been sold to a young French couple, who are planning to restore the garden.*