

France and Gardening

Come into the jardin, ma chère

A new business sprouts up in France

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An interview between a journalist and a consumer analyst

Alongside the out-of-town hyper-markets that ring French towns, a new species is spreading across the landscape : the suburban garden-centre . Offering everything from sturdy perennial plants, to hardwood garden kiosks and anti-mosquito lamps ., brands such as Truffaut, Jardiland and Gamm Vert have taken root . Jardiland now has 106 centres across France, an increase of 33 % since 2000 . GammVert has expanded its retail space by 20 % since 2001 . The French have traditionally been more passionate about cooking than gardening . So what is going on ?

Gardening certainly seems to be blooming . Between 1999 and 2004, France's garden-centre market grew by 17% , to nearly € 6 billion . And the French are not just buying fancy lights for the terrace : the biggest category sold is outdoor plants .

What could explain this new urge ?

Despite Voltaire's famous maxim that : " *il faut cultiver notre jardin*" , gardening has never been a national sport in France ,as it is in England . Newspapers do not devote pages to compost advice and there are no prime-time television garden shows promising to change your life with some floral arrangements and a water fountain . . Gardening in France has traditionally been either practical – the cultivation of vegetables – or a matter for the elite, like the famous 17th century gardens at Versailles .

Isn't suburbanisation an explanation for this recent interest ?

Indeed it is . The number of French households had reached 61 % by last year . Many others have at least a balcony or window box . Another factor could be that gardening , like organic food , has belatedly arrived as part of a wider ecological movement . " The return to nature has become fashionable " says Gamm Vert's marketing manager . Truffaut's marketing stresses that gardening is therapeutic : " When you look after your plants , your worries disappear ." But perhaps there is another explanation . The expansion of garden-centres dates from 2000,when the former Socialist government brought in the 35-hour working week . With fewer hours in the office , and less money in their pockets , the French have taken to gardening as they have to Do-it-Yourself as an inexpensive way to fill all that extra free time .

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