

Gilles Clément, born 1943 in Argenton-sur-Creuse, France

"To do as much as possible with as little as possible against"



Gilles Clement is a renowned gardener, botanist entymologist (he has a Cameroon butterfly named after him) and landscape designer who has developed a new approach to the art of garden design. A careful and tireless observer of the

natural environment the world over, he designs gardens that reflect the dynamics and biological diversity of plants and their perpetual evolution in space and in time.

Clement has worked extensively with city planners, architects, public and private commissions. His designs range in scale from intimate gardens to massive city parks.

He writes extensively on philosophy, insects, dogs, clouds, economics, land art and politics. Throughout his work, Clement stresses the importance of human-centered commitment to landscape

Clement rejects the concept of a garden as a sort of museum where nature should be kept under control and plants are just a series of exhibits. He believes gardens should be spaces for living in, where discoveries are made and where a sense of wonder prevails; they serve as a bridge between two worlds, that of humans and that of plants



This is the type of sterile, overly designed garden that Gilles Clement dislikes as there is little consideration given to the interaction between plants and the animal and insect world



This garden, whilst providing a space for play, contemplation and rest, is sympathetic to the wildness of the natural world and encourages the presence of beneficial insects that are integral to a healthy ecosystem



Gilles Clement bought land in La Valle, Cruese, France in 1977 and built his house himself. The living space that is an organic part of the landscape and is built of local materials



A view of the front of Gilles Clement's house. The garden has been allowed to self-seed

Clement is now a professor at the prestigious Versailles National School of Landscape Architecture where he is its only lecturer to teach natural history as well as design concepts. When asked to define himself, he says he is simply a gardener.

His garden philosophy espouses movement as a central tenet of his designs.

Clement views the phenomenon of movement as expressions of seasonal variation and change due to self-sowing and species migration. Moving gardens, lived in or visited, are never purely visual but very tactile — “you kneel, lie down, rub against, smell, inhale.”

“My gardens are meant to be brushed against,” writes Clément in his first book devoted to the moving garden that has been reprinted five times.



A detail from Parc Andre Citroen, designed and planted by Clement in 1992

As a teenager, helping his father spray roses with a highly toxic chemical, Gilles got of the chemical in an open cut which resulted in a two days coma. The outcome of that experience was to change Gilles Clement's approach to gardening and the natural world.

Soon after, Clément escaped his father's highly regimented garden in the beautifully wooded Creuse area south of Paris to study nature in a nearby valley. In 1977, Clement was able to buy the land in Creuse where he had sought refuge when he was young. He built a stone house there with his own hands and transformed the clearing into one of France's most admired gardens, now called **La Vallée**. It is still a sanctuary for himself, family, friends and other fauna



At La Vallée, Clément first experimented with the “**Moving Garden**, which he refers to as “a conceptual tool”.

In the book “The Garden in Movement,” published in 2011, Clement writes about a meadow within his property, where cows have disturbed the earth thereby creating the right environment for a species of orchid to germinate. Each germinating orchid is marked with a stick and a temporary path is laid down through the meadow to avoid the flowering plants. Every year, the orchids pop up in a different location, so every year the path is mown afresh to create a new path through the meadow – the garden moves.

Clement advocates sing what you have to create a sense of movement or wonder, for example you could cloud prune gorse bushes, cut a path through brambles, or create a focal point from fallen trunk



An example of cloud pruning

Abandoned farmland, left to its own devices, gradually evolves toward forest growth. For Clément, the gardener's intervention is not only admissible, it is central. He observes: "Watching wasteland, I am not only fascinated by the energy of nature's reclamation, I also want to know how to insert myself in the midst of this powerful flow."





Clement chooses the moment when spontaneous growth involves all the elements usually found in a garden: trees, shrubs, vines, bulbs, grasses — even wild roses. The gardener's role then is to guide and enrich in sympathy with natural process, integrating accidents like fallen trees. Clément uses no chemicals, no supplemental watering and no noisy, energy-wasting machinery. But he does prune.

Wild hornbeams are clipped into smooth domes; a path uphill meanders through the heart of a sprawling smokebush (Most paths are simply mown grass, their routing changing from year to year to preserve self-sown clumps of foxglove, verbascum or hogweed, which draws many interesting insects.



"A garden is always artificial," Clement insists, "but home gardens can become wildlife preserves." The **Garden in Movement** was coined by Clement to describe

the physical movement of plant species over the terrain. Rather than plan the garden ahead of time on a drafting table with a list of species, the gardener helps the garden to emerge in collaboration with the functional interventions of plants.



The moving garden section of the Parc André-Citroën

Clement's design for the **Parc André-Citroën** covers 35 acres of land and was completed in 1992. Its design was viewed as hugely controversial at the time. . (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nls8DjNHX1s>) The design includes a Moving Garden where the staff decide how the paths will be mown from year to year, to accommodate self-sown plants.

Gilles Clément explained the design as having four themes (artifice, architecture, movement and nature) with an overall transition from urban to rural. The use of water and clipped plants carry a distant echo of the French Baroque. A White Garden and a Black Garden are set into the urban fabric and lead on to the park's central feature - a vast rectangular lawn sliced through by a diagonal path. Two glasshouse pavilions, separated by a pavement of dancing fountains, stand at the urban end of the lawn. The River Seine flows at the far end. One flank of the lawn is bounded by a monumental canal and the other by two sets of small gardens: the six Serial Gardens and a wild Garden in Movement. The park is on the site of a former Citroen car factory, which was levelled.



Nearby, his colour-themed gardens have a complex symbolism, which visitors might sense even if uninformed.

- The blue garden: copper, Venus, Friday, rain, and the sense of smell



- The green garden: tin, Jupiter, Thursday, spring water, and the sense of hearing.
- The orange garden: mercury (the metal), Mercury (the planet), Wednesday, creeks, and the sense of touch.
- The red garden: iron, Mars, Tuesday, waterfalls, and the sense of taste.
- The silver garden: silver, the Moon, Monday, rivers, and sight.
- The golden garden: gold, the Sun, Sunday, evaporation, and the 6th sense.

Mothers report that when they enter the Green Garden, linked to the theme of silence, their children often stop talking.

In 1997, Piet Oudolf, Henk Gerritsen and Michael King commented on these gardens (in *Nieuwe bloemen, nieuwe tuinen*):

"Gilles Clément's triumph at Parc André-Citroën demonstrates the range of possibilities the art of gardening offers for both self-expression and communication. He has shown how ideas may be presented both on the grand scale and in the tiniest detail, making his approach as relevant to the private gardener as it should be to the broader world of the landscape architect."



Another view of the Moving Garden area of Parc André-Citroën, where paths and stepping stones are moving every year depending on where plants grow

Clément refuses the romantic idea of an artist's signature, but his public projects have common elements: He often links separate spaces — formally, as at Citroën or informally, like clearings in a forest — each with its own character. Connecting paths are meandering and multidirectional. Where he includes a single long axis (at Le Grande Arche de la Défense in the Domaine du Rayol), it never dominates in the sense of imposing a hierarchy and reveals little of the mysteries on either side, easily accessed from the long line but invisible until you happen right upon it.



An overview of Les Jardins de l'Arche de la Défense, built between 1991-8



A detail of the moving garden element of the garden created under the central axis

Gilles Clement's rejection of hierarchy, in garden design as in life, is almost obsessive. For several years running, Clément refused the French national prize for landscape architecture, insisting it should be given to the anonymous farmers, engineers and foresters who are the real architects of the landscape. In 1999, the prize was bestowed on him without his consent.

Clement calls for greater awareness before we interfere in our environment, asking us to look first before we act and to work with, rather than against, nature.

" The gardener is surrounded by the whole wealth of the natural world as it evolves in all its great diversity, and is able to see the interconnectedness of all living things. ... It is possible to live taking only what we need, to consume without damage to the environment, to cultivate the soil without depleting natural resources and to live without destroying our planet."



Ron Finlay – Los Angeles Guerilla Gardener. Concept of guerrilla gardening espouses everything Clement stands for

Clement is the foremost theorist of gardening and extremely provocative. He does not recognise the category of 'invasive plants' and believes that gardeners and designers should add the cultivation of fallow or waste land to their repertoire.

He is opposed to the present economic model that fails to consider its dismaying effects on climate and urges us to consider moving away from the political machine that applauds 'growth'

He believes that this period of coronavirus has given us a chance to reconsider how we do our lives

Clement writes about **Gardens of Resistance**, a notion that he developed whilst working in his own garden. He states that gardeners need to do less and look more

1995 In Derborence Island in Lille's Parc Henri Matisse is a 3500sqm concrete wall structure enclosing an environment left to free to grow without any intervention as a long-term refuge for urban biodiversity. This 7m-high concrete bunker-for-nature exposes the tensions between our desire to shape and use the landscape, and our awareness of the ecological value of 'wasteland'. In creating this paradoxical space, which is inaccessible but not truly wild, Clément questions the capitalist use-values of the surrounding urbanisation



Initially the local people hated the concept and the appearance and trees were planted that would eventually screen the escarpment. However, with time, people began to appreciate the phenomenon and trees were removed



This work resides within the Clement's conception of the '**Third Landscape**';

spaces that lie outside of cultivation or human use and are often important for the upkeep of biodiversity.

It can be corners of your garden that you leave deliberately untended and, perhaps, slightly influence by cutting back once a year or scattering seeds or taking out plants that will out compete the others. These are 'gardens of resistance'

Clement sees self-seeded plants as the emissaries of life itself because plants are oxygen giving, without them the human race cannot survive.

Therefore he views a parking lot, a roadside, a verge and the stony accumulations of alpine scree as having similar characteristics and supporting similar plants. Those that can make a living from seemingly hostile environments with no human intervention

If the Garden in Movement was Clement's first conceptual tool, His second one is the **Planetary Garden**, that emerged after he had seen the first photographs of Earth from space.



He imagined extending the confines — and care — lavished on home gardens to the whole globe. In 2000, Clément directed a major science exhibit in Paris to explain and provide positive examples of this theme.



"The main objective," writes Clément, "is to encourage biological diversity, a source of wonder and our guarantee for the future. In other words, the creation of a global Planetary Garden

In 1989 Clement proposed an 'austral garden for Domaine du Royol, a property on the Mediterranean coast acquired by the Conservatoire du Littoral to be open to the public. The Domain collects landscapes rather than specimens, from the Southern Hemisphere ie. South Africa, New Zealand Australia plus flora from California, the Canary Islands and China to form the Planetary Garden.





What these landscapes have in common is their association with a 'Mediterranean biome – together they make up a **planetary index**' ie. a theoretical continent where the plant's major climate areas and vegetation are grouped together.

(eg. look at Eden Project biomes, Cornwall – est. 2000)



The Planetary Garden signifies both Earth seen from space and the 'garden' that crops up on a bit of vacant land welcoming 'vagabond' or nomadic species.

It is a garden that requires humans to learn responsible gardening by doing less in order to achieve more

In 2011 Clement wrote an essay called **In Praise of Vagabonds** where he views weeds, self-sown plants, as creating a resistance to the human practice of overlooking seemingly bare sites. His attention becomes focused upon plants that colonise abandoned spaces, that grow in cracks and crevices - opportunistic plants that colonise areas that are open for exploitation of particularly robust species

A wonderful example of harnessing the value of weeds is Clement's Garden of Nettles. The water-nettle garden of the city of Melle is part of the context of, to quote Clement, "resistance to the dominant system in which all is bargained to the detriment of environment and humanity."

It features a modest, emblematic water purification system by plants. Three basins planted with vegetation naturally filter the water and return it to the stream after removing unwanted elements, essentially nitrates

A bridge crosses the basins to join a platform in the middle of the nettles. The various paths leading to the platform are clipped to the level of the nettles to protect visitors from stings.

A slurry filter is positioned at the centre of the platform and the resultant nettle slurry is filtered, collected and given away, free, at the Friday market.

The nettle garden is a statement in favour of free distribution of products proven efficient by gardeners over the years and, hence, belonging to history and not to any private enterprise.





Garden of nettles adjacent to a composting hole where nettle tea is used to assist break down of organic matter

For the past few years, Clément has been developing another concept, which he calls “Landscapes of the Third Kind.”

A study of highly managed farm and forest land south of Paris led him to seek out hidden spaces that escape monoculture and are forgotten by human industry. In other words, those in-between spaces often abandoned after misuse but still capable of spontaneous revival. He has always had sympathy for marginal and neglected spaces — as La Vallée once was.



The Third Landscape goes beyond the usual parallel of urban and rural to encompass the abandoned, overlooked spaces where plant life and animal life thrive. These can be seen as transitional zones, for example, brownfield sites, wastelands, swamps, moors, bogs, edges of roads, railway embankments

From a philosophical point of view – these are spaces that have no status and do not reflect power, they are humble yet full of life and potential, defying the odds to carve out an existence in marginal gaps and cracks.

By 2007 Clement refused to undertake any engagement with public or private service in France except for “overt projects of resistance”

2011 The garden of the Third Landscape proposed for the Roof of the Submarine Base of Saint Nazaire highlighting the ecological diversity of the Loire Valley. The designed worked with the fact that there was no soil in the area to be developed. A shallow substrate of gravel and sand was applied and then anything that grew there due to wind dispersal or seeds dropped or excreted by birds, was labelled.





Gilles Clement stated that:

"Real terrain, mysterious but explorable, invites the gardener to define its space, its wealth, its habitat. It holds humanity suspended in time. Each seed announces tomorrow. It is always a project. The garden produces goods, bears symbols, accompanies dreams. It is accessible to everyone. It promises nothing and gives everything."