Parterre Gardens

Parterre gardens have enriched the New Orleans landscape since the earliest times, as evidenced by the beautifully detailed map of the city by cartographer Jacques Nicolas Bellin below, dated 1744 and featured in Xavier Charlevoix’s *Histoire de la Nouvelle France*.

The parterres are the green areas, or formal gardens, usually constructed in geometric or symmetrical patterns on a level substrate, composed of plant beds and proportionally laid out hedges, which are both divided and connected by paths. Parterre comes from the French (early 17th century) *par terre*, meaning “on the ground”, and in Shakespeare's theater days, the parterre was truly “on the ground”. Parterre was the name for that cheap standing-room area right in front of the stage, usually filled with rowdy spectators.

A pioneer of the parterre garden in France was gardener extraordinaire Claude Mollet, *premier jardiner du Roy* — first gardener to three French kings, Henri IV, Louis XIII and the young Louis XIV. This landscaping design feature reached its greatest refinement at the Palace of Versailles, which served as inspiration for many similar parterres throughout Europe, not to mention some parterres in the Louisiana colony at *Nouvelle Orléans*. Claude Mollet and Hilaire Masson designed the layout of the gardens at Versailles, which remained relatively unchanged until the enhanced expansion under landscape architect André Le Nôrte during the reign of Louis XIV in the 1660s.
The original idea of the French parterre garden, with its assiduously designed plots and pathways, was to provide an artistic pattern when observed from a higher vantage point, such as from a raised terrace or upper window or balcony. When parterres were first developed, they relied on the visual impact of the beds’ complex geometry, rather than on colorful flowers.
Jacques Boyceau de la Baraudière’s *Traité du jardinage selon les raisons de la nature et de l'art*, published in Paris in 1638, explained parterres this way:

“Parterres are the low embellishments of gardens, which have great grace, especially when seen from an elevated position: they are made of borders of several shrubs and sub-shrubs of various colours, fashioned in different manners, as compartments, foliage, embroideries (*passements*), moresques, arabesques, grotesques, guilloches, rosettes, sunbursts (*gloires*), escutcheons, coats-of-arms, monograms and emblems (*devises*).”

One can appreciate this elevated view concept by looking down at the well-manicured parterre from the rear upper gallery of Evergreen Plantation in St. John the Baptist Parish (shown below).

French parterres had their origins in the gardens of the French Renaissance and often followed the form of knot gardens. Knot gardens are square frames of very formal design which contain a variety of culinary herbs and aromatic plants. Most knot gardens today now have boxwood hedges with the paths in between usually constituted with fine gravel. But originally, the designs of knot gardens did not have low hedge borders. Those might more accurately be called parterres.

Parterre paths are often laid with gravel or turf grass, and their interior
sections may be planted with flowers or other plants or simply filled with mulch or gravel. The plant beds have borders of stone or closely pruned hedging. In the later Baroque gardens of the 17th century, the designs became much more elaborate and stylized.

To enjoy the beauty of a proper parterre today, it doesn’t hurt to be a name-dropper. In this particular case, it’s the names of beautiful antique roses, such as: *Souvenir de la Malmaison, Cramoisi Superieur* and *Duchess de Brabant*.

Patrick Dunne, Epicurean oracle, expert on culinary style and proprietor of Lucullus Antiques in New Orleans, has mentioned the names of some additional beauties, *Rev d’Or* and *Old Blush*, which inhabit and reign supreme in his parterre at his Creole country home, *Serenity*. The house is situated on Bayou Carron in St. Landry Parish.

Also within his visually stimulating and effluvious garden one can find *Maid of Orleans* jasmine, which smells divine, an homage to *Sainte-Jeanne-d’Arc*.

Back in New Orleans, in City Park’s Botanical Garden, there is a very formal parterre garden tightly bordered with yaupon holly (*Ilex vomitoria*) and roses contained within the beds. The unattractive *vomitoria* name is due to the practice by Native Americans of making a caffeine tea from the yaupon leaves and twigs, which they drank and ceremonially vomited back up. Known as both *The Lord and Taylor Rose Garden* and *The Parterre*, it is indeed worth a visit, especially because this area contains the most Enrique Alferez sculptures in the garden.

Also worth a visit is the parterre garden at the historic Pitot House on Bayou St. John, once home of Mayor James Pitot. The parterre was restored according to a plan of what plants would have been in the garden during the years 1800 to 1830, just after the house was constructed and during the time the Pitot family resided there. In addition to the old roses mentioned earlier, *Souvenir de la Malmaison, Cramoisi Superieur* and *Duchess de Brabant*, the Pitot parterre also contains the *Veilchenblau* and *Archduke Charles*. Another decision was that boxwood be planted along the edges of each of the parterre beds, to provide just the right definition.
Pitot House on Bayou St. John and its parterre walkways
The Beauregard-Keyes home on Chartres Street in New Orleans also has a parterre garden. Originally built in 1826, the house was acquired in 1833 by Consul of Switzerland John A. Merle, who designed and built the home’s parterre garden. Archivist and historian Sally Reeves wrote on how certain French influences continued even during Spanish rule: “The Quarter’s par terre gardens continued in the French style with flowers in the middle and walkways on the boundaries.” She also wrote in *Louisiana Gardener* that some parterre patterns, illustrated in the New Orleans Notarial Archives, were laid out by Louis de Feriet in New Orleans sometime between 1820 and 1840.

St. Anthony’s Garden behind the St. Louis Cathedral is a place of tranquility and simple beauty amid the hustle and bustle of the French Quarter. For over a century, the Cathedral garden was a *potager* (or formal space for growing vegetables divided by walkways) and has evolved over the years. It was planted in rows and was originally situated behind an earlier Presbytère structure adjacent to the Church of St. Louis, as shown in the 1732 drawing below by Ignace Broutin.
And what would the “Garden District” of New Orleans be without a few lovely parterre gardens. This front yard parterre pictured below is a “Garden District” beauty.

The clipping above (in French) from the *New Orleans Tribune*, dated January 22, 1869, refers to a residence on the southeast corner of St. Charles and Jackson avenues, with *un grande parterre*, or large parterre garden.
The Payne-Strachan House on First Street in the Garden District, where the former President of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, died in 1889, was home to Mr. and Mrs. Frank Strachan. There Mrs. Strachan had designed four formal beds of standard roses bordered by box hedges and centered around an old sugar kettle as the focal point. A formal garden was designed there in 1960 by landscape architect Umberto Innocenti, born outside Florence, Italy, and included a Greek Revival tea house.

Writing on New Orleans gardens is 1973, Carolyn Fruthaler stated:

“Although in the 1840s the English landscape style was prevalent in Europe and the northeastern United States, New Orleanians preferred formal geometric beds, perhaps as a defense against the lush, overgrown look which often prevailed in the semi-tropical climate.”

Saints fans might appreciate this fleur-de-lis parterre design.

As you can see, parterres are still popular in the Crescent City and have been an integral part of New Orleans gardens for a great number of years. Often a combination of flowers and hedges, they may also
contain aromatics and herbs. Within their ordered boundaries are
plants and flowers that stimulate the senses of sight and smell, but
also appeal primarily to our sense of beauty, geometry and harmony.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
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Ned Hémard
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