

CASE STUDY

# Pure Theatre

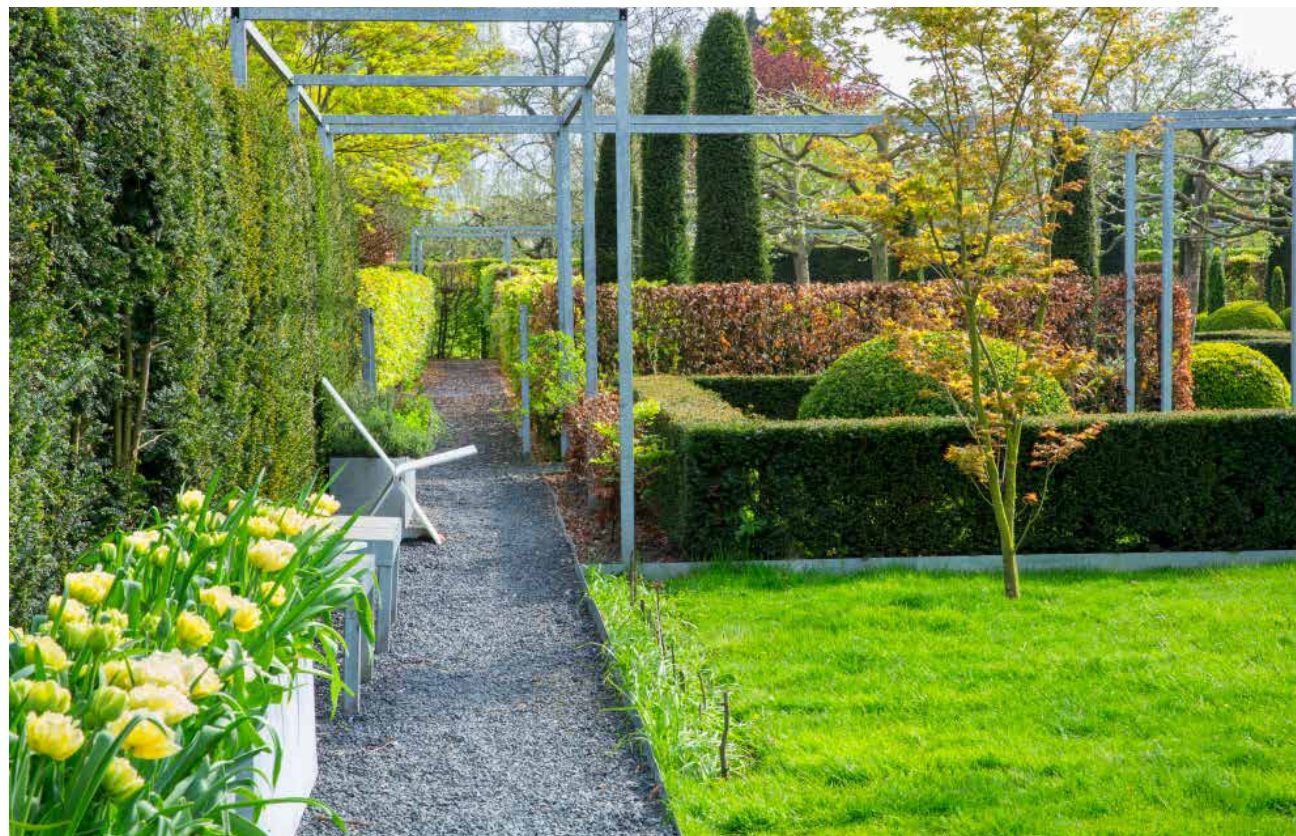
JO WILLEMS &amp; JAN VAN OPSTAL

The designers of the famous gardens at De Heerenhof have theatre in their blood, as is evident from the wonderful way this garden in the suburbs of Maastricht, in the Netherlands, has been laid out to look like a stage set. Standing in the wings are tantalising green hummocks of clipped *Buxus* (box) that contrast with the strong, dark columns of *Taxus* (yew). But the garden hasn't even started yet. In spring, a cool, white ribbon of tulips and narcissi winds through the box spheres towards the pond, breaks at the clipped yew hedge and continues, much to your surprise, on the other side of the hedge and then on to and beyond the raised pond. This is the New Garden, built in 2002 by professional garden designers Jan van Opstal, a choreographer, and Jo Willems, a theatre director. It sits adjacent to their Old Garden, built some 30 years ago. Neither had gardened before they embarked on the Old Garden, which has the same mixture of formality and playfulness, while being more romantic and traditional than its new minimalist sister. Both gardens use a backbone of evergreen structure to stage areas, such as the double circle of box hedging that forms the Green Room in the Old Garden, where you want to pause and enjoy the scenery. Steel girders were used in the new garden to divide the area into rooms, framing the ever-changing views as you walk through. Both designers enjoy welcoming visitors, to which end they are always changing the scenery, moving pots, pruning trees and creating new plantings to tantalise and enchant.

**Right:** The view of the New Garden looking across the formal ponds to H' House, designed by Dutch architects Wiel Arets. Cloud-pruned box mounds contrast with the yew columns and tightly clipped yew hedge. Pleached apple trees soften the canopy.







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# Design Checklist

**1. Grow bulbs.** They are incredibly versatile and, as well as being used in beds and pots, can be grown in lawns and meadows. To create a ribbon of bulbs, use a spade to cut away the turf in the shape you want to plant and then plant the bulbs, replacing the turf afterwards.

**2. Naturalise bulbs in grass** by throwing them across the ground and planting them where they fall. Use a hand trowel or bulb planter to plant them one by one. It is easier to plant after rain when the ground is not too hard.

**3. Provide year-round structure.** The New Garden at De Heerenhof is built around a permanent architecture of evergreen plants and steel that looks good all year.

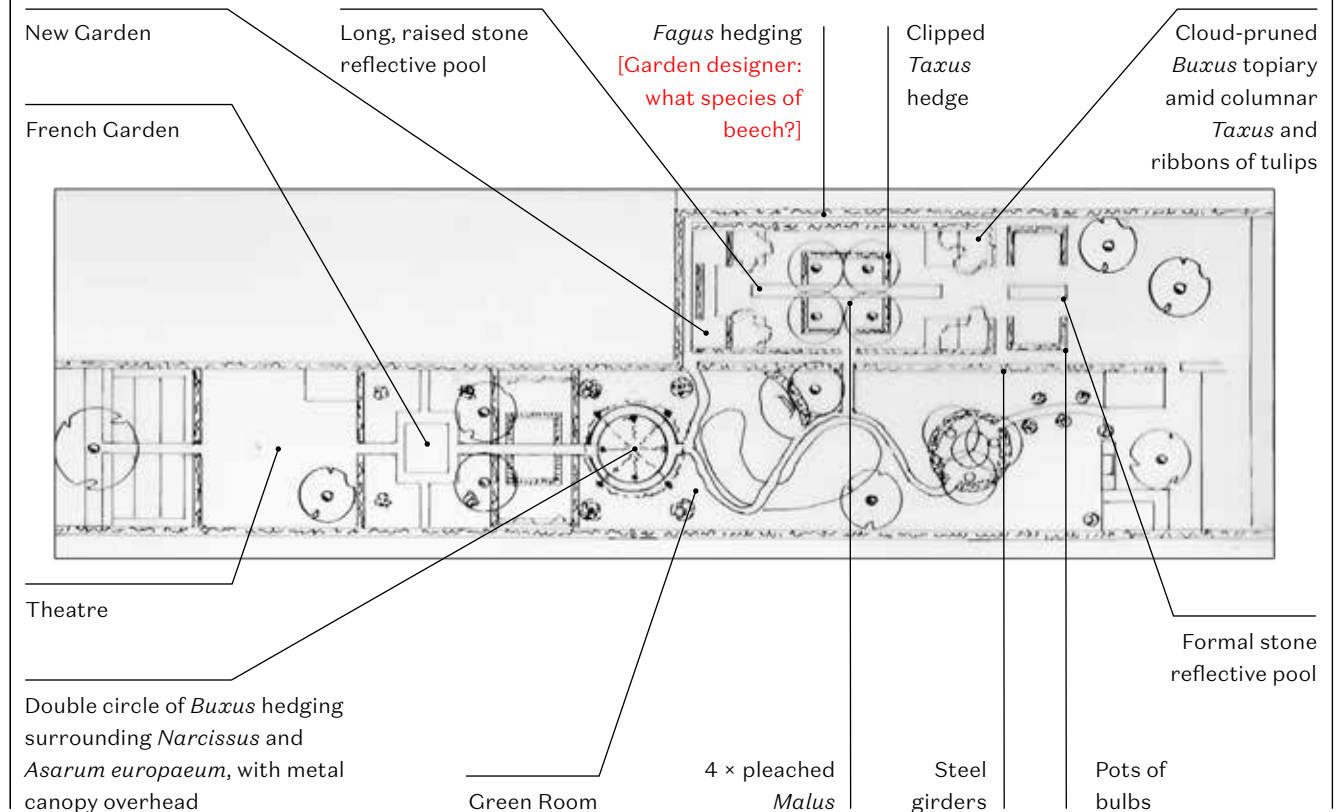
**4. Always buy good-quality bulbs from a specialist supplier** who will usually have bulk offers. Check the bulbs are a good size and also firm, with no mould, and plant from mid- to late autumn at a depth of twice the height of the bulb.

**5. Grow better tulips.** Most tulips will come up again after the first year, but are often smaller, which is why people buy fresh bulbs. Remove the flowering heads by pulling them off, but leave the foliage to die back naturally. If you plan to use the bulbs again, strengthen them after flowering by watering as needed and feeding once a week with a potassium-rich fertiliser until the leaves have died down.

**6. Use containers to provide spots of colour.** Again, bulbs are ideal for this, enabling you to change the mood of the garden each spring and summer. The 'Orange Emperor' tulips were planted by Jan van Opstal to mark the coronation of King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands in 2013.

**7. Enjoy yourself!** It is very easy when embarking on a garden to be overwhelmed. Don't be afraid to do what you like and what you want. The very best gardens are reflections of their owners and will have a personality and spark.

**8. Think of the garden as theatre** and draw in your audience by preparing set pieces and surprises. The ribbon of tulips used here, for example, is a wonderful device, making you want to find out where it leads. Likewise, the Green Room in the Old Garden makes you stop to contemplate the scene.





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# The Details



Steel girders play on the idea of garden rooms and interact with the green geometry to create a feeling of height and space.



*Tulipa* 'Orange Emperor' with deep purple pansies.



Ribbons of *Tulipa* 'Casablanca', *Narcissus* 'Thalia', *N.* 'Ice Wings' and *Leucojum vernum* (spring snowflake).



The ribbon of bulbs rolls on through the box, across the lawn towards the yew hedge and beyond.



*Tulipa* 'Ivory White' with white violas in long metal planters.



The small formal pool outside the house links the building with the long raised pond.