

HANDLING of the ORANGE TREES (6 E)

Orange trees were purchased in 1737 from Francis of Lorraine, later Holy Roman Emperor (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_I,_Holy_Roman_Emperor) when he was forced to abandon his homeland under the pressure of the French. He sold everything he could so that it did not fall into the hands of the new masters. Most of the objects in the gardens at Lunéville (nicknamed Lorraine's Versailles) went to Schwetzingen Palace in Rhineland-Palatinate, but Freÿr acquired 24 orange trees.

Some of these trees are more than three hundred years old and are the oldest orange trees in planters in Europe (ICOMOS Conference 2005, Bamberg).

In the summer months

The trees are fertilized with cow manure and sometimes mineral salts, whilst the leaves are sprayed with vegetable oil or more incisive tree protection products, when necessary.

The soil is covered with hedge cuttings. This helps to keep the earth damp and prevents weeds from growing. The cuttings are removed when the trees are brought in for winter.

At the end of June the blossoms start appearing. There are fewer of them than in the past. In 1993 and 1995, the water of the Meuse flooded to 1.50 meters and was polluted with chemicals used in intensive agriculture and washed away by the rain. Those chemicals modified the metabolism of the trees: the leaves became dominant at the expense of the fruits.

Watering depends on the weather and the period of the year. When the sap rises (till the end of July) and when the weather is cold or wet, one to two buckets per week and per tree suffice, depending on the volume of the foliage. During heat waves, the leaves are sprayed with two buckets of water per day. After July, watering becomes progressively less frequent.

At the end of the summer, the most protruding shoots are cut. The trees are pruned like large bonsai, reminding us of their Eastern origin.

Most of the flower buds are removed to avoid exhaustion of the trees.

Anecdotes

In 1976 our last gardener left. My mother then took on the task of looking after the orange trees, following the advice left by her grandmother : “ in summer, a bucket of water per tree and per day shall you give; in winter, one per month shall suffice. ”

After treating them that way for a year the leaves started turning yellow: after two years there were few leaves left and one tree was lost the following winter. So she went to Versailles to seek advice. When the head-gardener heard her story, he burst out laughing: “ That's a really funny Belgian story. Madam, it's warmer here, it rains less and we only water them once a week ! ” On her return home she realized that her grandmother was well aware of her gardeners' lack of zeal, and so had prescribed one bucket a day to be sure the trees got at least one a week, not thinking her grand-daughter would follow her advice to the letter !

Until 1950, Louise de Laubespain, then 90 years old, picked the orange blossoms. She was complaining that her companion, in her seventies, could no longer hold her ladder steady : “This poor Mary is getting old.”

With hundreds of blossoms per tree, she was making tea, sweets, and a fermented beverage, a kind of orange beer.

Leaving the orangery,

At the bottom of the stairs, you'll see two small Chinese orange trees, whose fruits remind you of the shape of Buddha's fingers. The cultivation of orange trees originated in China.

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