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. Gamm Vert 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.