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The organic garden at the U.S. Ambassador's Residence, while formal, belies its location behind one of the grandest houses on one of the most elegant streets of Paris. (Department of State/Patrick Maulavé)

Vilsack visits People's Garden at Paris embassy residence

By JERRY HAGSTROM

PARIS--When Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack visited Paris last week for the G20 meeting of agriculture ministers, he stopped to tour something at the American ambassador's residence: an organic vegetable garden inspired by the USDA People's Garden program and First Lady Michelle Obama's kitchen garden at the White House.

The American ambassador's residence in Paris, located at 41 Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré between the Elysee Palace, the French president's residence, and the Cercle de l'Union Interalliée, a private club, is one of the grand houses of the world.

Built in the 1840s by a woman from New Orleans, the Baroness de Pontalba, the house was later owned by members of the Rothschild banking family, but served as a Nazi officers' club during World War II. The American government bought it in 1948, and it became the ambassador's residence in 1972.

Behind the art-filled mansion there is a sweeping lawn that is used daily for entertaining in the summer. Pamela Harriman, the U.S. ambassador to France during the Clinton administration, gave a Fourth of July garden party promoting American foods that earned her the reputation as the American farmer's best friend in Europe. But it would have been hard to imagine Harriman, who had been married to Winston Churchill's son and was the widow of railroad magnate and diplomat Averell Harriman, growing vegetables in the back yard.

On Monday, however, when Ambassador Charles Rivkin and his wife Susan Tolson host their Fourth of July party, the food will include herbs and vegetables grown in the residence's ornamental, organic kitchen garden or "jardin potager ornamental biologique," as the embassy describes it in French.

Tolson told The Hagstrom Report in an interview that she had been inspired by Michelle Obama's garden on the south lawn of the White House, and that she



*Xavier Audran, an economist in the U.S. Embassy's Office of Agricultural Affairs, shows Secretary Tom Vilsack the garden designed by French horticulture students.
(Department of State/Patrick Maulavé)*

considers the Paris garden and advocacy for the first lady's healthy eating campaign her "little bit" of a contribution to diplomacy while her husband serves as ambassador.

The garden was designed and built by students at the *École Du Breuil*, a Paris professional horticultural school, she explained, after the embassy's agriculture affairs office introduced her to school officials. The students were present for Vilsack's visit to receive certificates and gifts of appreciation.



Students from École Du Breuil with Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and Susan Tolson, wife of U.S. Ambassador to France Charles Rivkin. (Department of State/Patrick Maulavé)

Inspired by President Lincoln's view that the Agriculture Department was the "People's Department," Vilsack started the People's Garden initiative in 2009 by planting a garden at the USDA headquarters in Washington and encouraging all USDA facilities around the world to plant a garden.

The Paris ambassador's garden is very different from the People's Garden at the USDA headquarters in Washington and even from the White House kitchen garden.

The USDA garden features indigenous grasses and flowers, including the Native American "three sisters" plants — corn, beans and squash — that grow together in a mound. And while the White House kitchen garden is all edible items, the Paris

garden is a mixture of beautiful flowers with the vegetables and herbs mixed in.

And, although the White House garden is not technically organic, Tolson said she wanted to make the Paris garden “totally organic and in the style of the residence with flowers and vegetables ripening so that there would be color at all times.”

École Du Breuil professor Hervé Dardillat said mixing flowers and vegetables is traditional in France, and allows the two types of plants to protect each other from diseases.



From left: Michael Keller, manager of government and public affairs for Pioneer in Western Europe; Susan Tolson, wife of U.S. Ambassador to France Charles Rivkin; Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, and Martin Viro, president of DuPont France. (Department of State/Patrick Maulavé)

Pioneer, a division of DuPont, provided seeds for ornamental, multi-headed sunflowers and for drought-tolerant corn that the company is not yet selling in France. DuPont France President Martin Viro and Michael Keller, a Pioneer spokesman, were present for the Vilsack visit. Keller noted that the corn seed is not genetically modified, which would be illegal to use in France. Pioneer DuPont also paid for an intern from École Du Breuil to work in the garden.

The students were challenged to work as a team and to design a garden from scratch that was both ornamental and useful, Dardillat said. He described the garden as “a boat garden” because many of the plants are in wooden boxes, built from rot-resistant chestnut wood.

Student Milly Auger said the ambassador's garden was "a big chance for the school and for us" because it was a prestigious assignment and the students did all the work from designing the garden to executing it.

The French media has pretty much ignored the garden on the theory that the United States is a country of fast food and obese people who have nothing to teach the French about gardening, a source with a knowledge of the garden told The Hagstrom Report.

Not all the French are so cynical, however. Representatives of the Paris Mayor's Office of Green Spaces and the Environment and the Federation Nationale des Jardins Familiaux et Collectifs, an organization that helps individuals, families and groups of people to garden, attended the event.



(Department of State/Patrick Maulavé)

Guillame Bros of the federation noted that many French eat "quick food" and that "poor people have a lack of good food." His group pushes local governments to make space available for gardens and to rehabilitate soil that has not been used for growing food for many years. Bros said that "people want good, organic food," but that it is a different time from World War II when people grew food in gardens because they had to, and that people need encouragement to garden.

After touring the garden Vilsack said, "I like to see people's gardens anywhere," and that he had been particularly impressed that the plants included kiwi that does not have to be peeled.

But Vilsack's Iowa roots may have shown through also. He said he hoped he did not create a diplomatic incident when he noted that the corn in the garden had a ways to go if it was "to be knee high by the Fourth of July."

At the ambassador's Independence Day party in Paris on Monday, the focus will be on foods from the garden. Yves Roquel, the executive chef at the residence, said his favorites from the garden include basil pesto, mille feuilles de tomates and glacé a la verveine — verbena ice cream.

- [French Ambassador's Residence Garden Booklet](#)
- [French Ambassador's Residence Garden Photos](#)
- [Italian People's Garden](#)

- [USDA People's Garden Initiative](#)

Hagstrom Report resumes Tuesday

The Hagstrom Report will not publish Monday in observance of Independence Day. We will return to your inbox on Tuesday, July 5.

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The Hagstrom Report, LLC | Watergate Station
| 2512 Virginia Ave. NW | PO Box 58183 | Washington, DC 20037-9997 |