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DRAPED WITH LIFE View over the main terrace, 'Messel Green' furniture and West Indies mahogany trees, main; left, the south terrace veranda

'Even in the shade, the greens are so bright in Barbados'

Kit Braden, the chairman of L'Occitane, has found a family home in Fustic House, he tells ***Alex Thomas***

If Kit Braden's wife Rose hadn't suffered from a winter cough, the couple's present life might have been very different. Having never given much thought to the Caribbean – after all, he is chairman of the Provençal beauty company L'Occitane and has spent much time in the Mediterranean – the extended family took a house on the beach at Prickly Bay, Grenada, for the winter of 2012-13. It offered sunshine and warmth and a chance for that cough to clear up.

With four children and (now) 10 grandchildren, "I started to think 'this is quite nice,' so we looked around a bit," says Braden, 76, as we lunch in the couple's Provençal-inspired dining room. It is a grey, chilly December day outside in Holland Park, west London and you can see his point, especially as he has a cough himself.

Having looked at a property on Grenada, his children spotted that Fustic House was for sale in neighbouring Barbados. It was rented out for the Christmas holidays but the Braden family managed to book an hour's slot when the guests were out on New Year's Eve and flew over to inspect.

It was raining, but nevertheless Braden asked to walk the boundaries of the 11-acre property. "By the time we had done that, in my mind I had bought it." Then there was a quick whizz around the island in a taxi to explore before heading back. "That is all we knew of Barbados." They had the keys by June 1 2013.

It seems appropriate that Braden had fallen under Fustic's spell so immediately, as "dreamlike" and "magical" are qualities often ascribed to the estate, which sits on an escarpment overlooking the Caribbean in the northern parish of St Lucy.

It is far away, in spirit at least (Barbados is only 21 miles long), from Sandy Lane and the flashy developments further down the west coast and has something of a fabled reputation, its coral-stone-pierced gates rarely swinging open to the public.

Screened by thick vegetation and tall West Indian mahogany trees, which are at least 100 years old and cast cooling shade over extensive lawns, the 18th-century former sugar plantation house is one of the handful on the island that were renovated or built in the Sixties and Seventies by Oliver Messel. One of the foremost theatrical, film and set designers of the day, Messel was a man who knew how to make all the world a stage, and especially the properties that he worked on.

Although two more pavilions have been added in the grounds at Fustic, a succession of respectful owners has ensured the property retains the spirit Messel intended: wrapped up in its own little world, with the house sitting comfortably in relation to the garden, loggias, wide terraces and arches dripping with jasmine and the wisteria-like queen's wreath, *Petrea volubilis*, all framing the wonderful views of the Caribbean 350ft below.

The place is made for entertaining but also hiding oneself away in a shady corner. The designer's trademark "Messel green" – a light minty sage known throughout the island – still appears on shutters and doors, columns, his squiggly railings and the outdoor furniture. The pots he designed are still here, filled with bougainvillea and desert roses. Even today his presence, like a benign ghost, is very much felt.

Messel's clients were his friends Vivien and Charles Graves (brother of Robert Graves) and the house has changed hands roughly every 10 years since. Much of the garden in evidence today was put in by Todd Longstaffe-Gowan during the Nineties for Sigrid Rausing and her then husband, the publisher and art dealer Dennis Hotz, though it had been rather neglected in recent years and had become overgrown.

Longstaffe-Gowan spent part of his childhood on Barbados, in an old plantation house of the same era, so the house and land at Fustic felt quite familiar to him. He got to know the place well, as he worked with the couple on the garden for three years. "It was great fun as they were really willing to do extraordinary things. It is a lovely location: unusual in that it is in a very dramatic site facing the west. The fun was to reconnect the house to the sea, as the trees had grown up so much they blocked the view."

One thing that strikes you about the garden is how green it is, with layers of foliage and form. "Messel's favourite colour was green," says Longstaffe-Gowan. "The light is so intense, greens have the most extraordinary range of hues, it responds so well. You don't need lots of colour. In the tropics, even in the shade the greens are so bright."

Flamboyant trees, also known as royal poinciana (*Delonix regia*), planted in view of the veranda, ensure there is a jolt of red flowers in the winter.

Longstaffe-Gowan was particular about what would go into the garden, and wanted to use the traditional vocabulary of the island. The fluffy zoysia grass, in areas now used by Braden's family for playing badminton or croquet, was dug up from a derelict hotel on the coast. At that time, there were few nurseries and the quantities they supplied were unreliable, so Longstaffe-Gowan would stop off when he spotted a plant that he fancied in a local garden and haggle a price for it.

It was Longstaffe-Gowan who put in the lake, but the greatest feature of the garden – actually perhaps of all the gardens on Barbados – is the swimming pool. Blasted out of the coral rock by Messel, it resembles a deep natural (well, almost) lagoon, the sides lined with leafy ferns, philodendron and plumbago. It looks like something that would appear in a Bond film.

Each owner makes their own mark, and Braden's, with Janine Weetch, who comes in as a consultant several days a week, and three full-time gardeners, has been to bring the garden back from neglect (turn your back and everything has grown up) and to terrace and plant the area below the rebuilt sundeck with abundant palms, philodendron and elephants' ears and to tidy up and replant the tropical ravine.

Braden was also much inspired by Anthony Hunte, a plantsman with one of the most well-known gardens on the island, open to the public (huntes gardensbarbados.com). They have also established a service path known as the Mi down to the pavilion at the bottom. Hewn from the rock, its sides are covered in many hues of bougainvillea, providing a cheerful splash of colour that is hidden from view until you are almost upon it. Down in the ravine is one of two fustic trees (*Chlorophora tinctoria*), rare on the island, which give the house its present name (it used to be called Seaview).

"It is not a particularly glamorous tree, frankly," admits Braden, though it does have its purposes, exploited especially in the First World War – "if you boil up the wood, you get the dye for khaki," he says.

L'Occitane has sponsored three Mediterranean gardens by James Basson at Chelsea and Basson, who won Best in Show in 2017, has become a great friend and has stayed twice.

Sadly though, their Chelsea partnership will be no more. It's nothing personal, just that the show has become so expensive – gardens can cost half a million pounds, when all the incidental costs are included. Braden also balks at the environmental cost of making a garden that only exists for a week. "L'Occitane is very environmentally friendly." If you want to install it somewhere else, it costs almost as much to take out as to put in, as he points out.

Back to less troubled thoughts, I ask Braden where is his favourite spot in the garden. He is fond of the boules court they have created under the shade of the mahogany trees, where the family gathers for a game and an evening drink but also, "there is a spot on the far side of the lake which is the highest place on the property. It is above the deck and the swimming pool and it is the furthest south piece of the garden, which has a wonderful view over the Caribbean. I like that."

It sounds like the perfect medicine for those coughs.

Fustic is open on February 3 for the Barbados Horticultural Society, 2pm-6pm. For the full list of gardens, visit horticulturebarbados.com. The property can be rented through Blue Sky Luxury (001 246 622 4466).

ANDREA JONES

GO GREEN Messel-designed container with desert rose, left; horsehead philodendron, Boston fern and plumbago by the lagoon pool, right

The swimming pool, blasted out of the coral rock, looks like something out of a Bond film

Messel knew how to make all the world a stage... especially the houses he worked on

SUNNY AND SUSTAINABLE

Owning a property in the Caribbean that you only visit for a few months a year is expensive, so Braden is trying to be as self-sufficient as possible. Young plants are raised in an on-site nursery, where any incoming plants are also quarantined in case of disease.

As he points out, "it rains every day; if you read the weather forecast, you would never go there", but as Barbados is made of coral, water quickly runs straight through the topsoil. There are no rivers on the island, only springs. Luckily, at Fustic there are large aquifers between the coral and the underlying bedrock, so they have two bore holes for an irrigation system and modern, efficient pumps.

Also, "you can't believe how much greenery comes off 11 acres every day," says Braden. Before his time this was taken away in truckloads, with compost then being brought in. Good soil on this coral is all-important, so an enormous chopper on tracks has been installed to break down the leaves, which are then added to compost heaps.

Braden has also changed the bulbs on all 120 of the outdoor lights to low-energy ones, and has installed solar panels in discreet locations.

OLIVER MESSEL ON BARBADOS

Leaving behind his high-society life and a successful career in Britain, Oliver Messel came to live on Barbados in 1959, to ease his arthritis. It was timely: having renovated Maddox, his own property in St James, he became much in demand to work his magic on the houses of the jet set who had been coming in increasing numbers since the Fifties.

Whether a property was old or newly built, he managed to give each a sense of romantic, timeless elegance with a great lightness of touch that combined both European and Caribbean elements; they are now some of the island's most sought-after houses.

Messel was also responsible for many of the original houses on Mustique, the island bought by Colin Tennant in 1958 and which included Les Jolies Eaux, a 10-acre wedding present Tennant gave in 1960 to Princess Margaret and Antony Armstrong-Jones (Messel's nephew), who was later to become Lord Snowdon.

Messel died in 1978, aged 74.

A LIFE OUTDOORS The dinner table on the eastern veranda, above; view through storm shutters into loggia, far left; the garden's open air shower area, below left

GARDEN SHOP
THREE DELIGHTFUL DELPHINIUMS

Chosen by plant hunter *Lark Hanham*

A member of the Ranunculaceae family, delphinium – also known as larkspur – is a hardy perennial originally admired by the Victorians, who started to hybridise it. Today, it remains a much-loved cottage-garden favourite, thanks to its brilliant blue or romantic pastel tones and flowering longevity in summer. The form is also impressive, with giant columns filled with flowers and palmately lobed leaves.

Despite their imposing size and height, delphiniums offer an air of elegance and femininity. The three varieties shown here make striking cut flowers, but may sometimes need staking. Max spread 2ft (60cm).

'LA BOHEME'

Despite its unusual bicoloured appearance, this elatum-type delphinium is incredibly resilient and very hardy. Its flowers are intricately ruffled and double, adding another dimension to borders and bouquets. Each bloom is encompassed by navy blue sepals and multiple layers of frilly white with a light green blush. Height 2ft 7in (80cm).

'SKY SENSATION'

Exquisitely understated, the large flower spires each feature a striking contrast of pink-blushed white blooms and a coal black eye. 'Sky Sensation' is a very sought-after and difficult to find delphinium; to showcase its rarity, place this unusual variety in a sunny area where everyone can see it and wonder at its beauty. Height 3ft (90cm).

'YELLOW PEARL'

Showy open blooms offer a understated beauty in a very unusual sherbet lemon colour on this belladonna-type delphinium. The stems are well branched and upright, with deeply dissected leaves that add variety to borders. Works best in well-drained soil and sheltered locations where the slender structure will be protected from prevailing winds. Height 6ft (1.8m).

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