

A lush garden scene featuring a potted orange tree in the foreground, ferns, and wisteria plants hanging from above. The background is filled with dense green foliage and a large tree trunk.

ITALY'S PRIVATE GARDENS

AN INSIDE
VIEW

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12 La Torrecchia

Cisterna, Lazio

The background

La Torrecchia was once that melancholy thing – a ruined castle surrounded by a medieval village, deserted, forgotten and covered in ivy. Unlike Ninfa – which is only a few kilometres away (see pp.148–61) – it was never a particularly important place. Over the centuries ownership passed from one noble family to another and they generally seemed to take more interest in the 2000-hectare (5,000-acre) estate than the village itself. In 1990 La Torrecchia was bought by Carlo Caracciolo, the founder of *La Repubblica*, one of Italy's most important newspapers. Caracciolo had never seen the village. He simply bought it along with 700 hectares (1,700 acres) of land as a favour to a friend in financial difficulty. He visited it for the first time in 1991, intending to see the place before arranging to sell it. By then the village had been virtually deserted for 800 years and most of the buildings had disappeared beneath the undergrowth, but he and Violante, his wife, were seduced by the extraordinary beauty of the ruined castle and the unspoilt landscape of the estate that surrounded it. Their first decision was to make a house from a derelict eighteenth-century granary that stood just inside the castle gate. They commissioned Gae Aulenti, renowned for her design of the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, Palazzo Grassi in Venice and a host of other extraordinary buildings, to convert the granary into a villa. Lauro Marchetti, curator of the gardens of Ninfa, was invited to supervise the restoration of the ruins. It took eighteen months to build the new house within the walls of the granary and to clear the landscape surrounding it. As the site was cleared it proved to be archaeologically richer than anyone had suspected, for Roman remains were discovered beneath the ruins of the medieval village.

In 1995 Violante Caracciolo asked Lauro Marchetti to make a garden. He created the bones of the new garden between 1995 and 1997. Dan Pearson was then employed to develop the site further, creating the garden that we see today, and in 1998 he appointed Stuart Barfoot as head gardener. Violante Visconti Caracciolo died in April 2000. With Carlo Caracciolo's death in 2008 responsibility for the garden passed to his daughter, Jacaranda.

RIGHT The walls of La Torrecchia's ruined castle form the entrance to the garden.



BELOW Jacaranda Caracciolo, who has inherited La Torrecchia from her father.

RIGHT The lake at the bottom of the garden is surrounded by arum lilies in summer.



La Torrecchia today

Carlo and Violante Caracciolo were in a tearing hurry. They felt old age and illness at their heels and they wanted to enjoy La Torrecchia for as long as possible before they were caught. It's a sad business, visiting La Torrecchia after their deaths, but it is immediately obvious that they accomplished their mission, for the garden has achieved a precocious but entirely convincing maturity in only fifteen years. How was it done? Jacaranda Caracciolo remembers those early days when Violante and her father 'fell madly in love' with La Torrecchia. The ground was still covered in brambles and ivy smothered the ruins. Lauro Marchetti, who had a lifetime's experience of dealing with ruins at Ninfa, began to strip away the ivy and stabilise the walls of the castle and the houses of the village. 'When ivy gets hold of a building it squeezes tight. You can cut it off and poison the roots, but then you just have to wait for it to loosen its grip,' Lauro says. But Carlo couldn't wait. He didn't have time. 'He would ring me every day,' Lauro recalls, 'just to say "hurry up, hurry up!"' Eventually Lauro found himself organising a team of twenty-two men to strip the ivy from the walls, centimetre by centimetre.

As soon as the house was complete, Violante decided that she wanted a garden. Only one thing stood in her way – there was no water. Lauro contacted a hydraulic engineer who arrived at once, bringing an elderly water diviner with him. Good news – the diviner detected a water source almost immediately. They dug and dug and when they reached a depth of 120 metres Lauro turned to Carlo and said, 'I'm sorry, we are just wasting your money'. Carlo was not so easily disillusioned. 'Keep digging!' he said – and they did. At 170 metres they hit an underground river coursing from the mountains to the sea. This became La Torrecchia's water, pure, sweet and so abundant that it supplies both the garden and the houses on the estate.

'Water solved all La Torrecchia's problems,' Lauro says. He began to lay out a garden at once. Using chalk, he traced a meandering course for the water on the ground. It entered the garden over a small cascade that he built close to the house, and then trickled down the slope in a narrow stream, arriving at last in a small lake at the bottom of the site. Violante and Lauro worked together to select and plant the trees that would create structure in the open ground beyond the house. Working with Violante was a very novel experience for Lauro. 'At Ninfa,' he explains, 'I grow plants from seed whenever I can. When they germinate they can look round and say to themselves, "Yes, this is home."' At La Torrecchia he learned to work in another way. Violante had

no time for his kind of gardening. 'I'm old,' she would say, 'and I'll die soon.' Together they selected enormous numbers of mature trees, including flowering cherries to plant in a spinney on the crest of the hill, three eighty-year-old cork oaks (*quercus suber*) and pomegranates to cluster around the stream at the far end of the garden.

Lauro worked at La Torrecchia for four years, and in that time they brought 10,000 plants into the garden. He accompanied Carlo and Violante to visit gardens and garden shows all over Europe. They never missed the Chelsea Flower Show in London, and it was there that they first met Dan Pearson. By this time La Torrecchia's garden was taking shape, but Ninfa demanded Lauro's full attention, and he had already recognised the need for an English eye at La Torrecchia. 'Look at the style of it,' he said to Violante. 'It's a bit like Ninfa, and you should have an English person involved. Someone with a romantic, informal vision.' Dan

Pearson was that person. In his book *Spirit, Garden Inspiration*, Dan describes the process of working with Violante. 'Once I had her confidence,' he recalls, 'we started to work together to make a garden that, at one moment, was all about restraint and nothing more than shifting shadows on the lawn and the next, a fecund, rustic romance.' They worked closely together until Violante's death in 2000, adding an unlaced, English abundance to the planting. He appointed Stuart Barfoot in 1998, a young English gardener who has carried through his ideas and added many of his own. Carlo Caracciolo died in December 2008 and Stuart has spent a year on a garden design course in London. He plans to return to La Torrecchia for one week each month. In his absence Angelo, one of a team of three gardeners, is in charge.

Anyone lucky enough to visit La Torrecchia today will find a house for sleeping princesses, its windows closed, roses throwing their arms across the steps and the petals of white wisteria lying





as thick as snow on an unswept terrace. The slightly melancholy atmosphere of this scene is immediately dispelled by the garden. Here Stuart has cultivated a style that he calls *selvatico-cantata*, and defines as 'the very tenuous equilibrium between wild and controlling that I always believed was right for the garden'. Beyond the house a sweeping river of a lawn falls away from the building. A curving band of trees shades sinuous borders packed with a very English woodland planting of ferns, white foxgloves, nicotiana, white aquilegia and huge clumps of philadelphus that fill the air with scent. White honesty crowds at the foot of trees and white agapanthus and hydrangeas stand by to take over in July. The edge of the bed is fringed with long grass where narcissi, muscari and crocuses flower in spring. Here, close to the house, everything is green or white. 'Violante wanted a calming garden,' Stuart explains. 'She hated that burnt off look of the landscape in the summer. She wanted to be here in July and August in a green oasis. Nothing with silver leaves or hot colours was allowed in the garden.' A few touches of the 'right' pink crept in among the roses, along with some pure blues and very subtle yellows.

It would not have been easy to source this very English medley of plants in Italy, and one of the first things that Stuart did was to set up a nursery. 'It's a huge affair,' he says, 'and it takes up a massive amount of our time. We produce on a large scale, growing three varieties of foxgloves, white *Aquilegia* 'crystal', orlea and nigella.' Sometimes they plant seedlings directly into the soil, but Stuart prefers to prick out five or six plants and grow them on in a pot before planting them out as a group. 'Planting clumps rather than individual plants creates a nicer feeling,' he says.

The planting palette at La Torrecchia has expanded since Violante's death. 'Carlo got bored with the strictly green and white colour scheme,' Stuart says. 'We have kept planting in the area immediately surrounding the house exclusively white, but we have gradually introduced colour as you descend into the garden.' From the outset, Dan and Stuart were determined to create distinct styles in the different areas of the garden so that, as Dan explains in his book, you move through the garden 'from level to level and mood to mood'. Colour has become part of this process. You might easily miss the steep steps that lead into the sunken garden, and if you did you would miss the first of La Torrecchia's great surprises. It is an outdoor room enclosed on all

LEFT In this area close to the house, the planting palette is predominantly white and green. The effect of these colours in the shade of the trees is soothing and refreshing.



sides by ancient walls. One wall is smothered in white wisteria and the others support white clematis and white roses. So no change there, until you notice the stone tank, slightly raised and filled to the brim with water, that Dan has designed to fill the oblong space. And here is the surprise. The margins of the tank are outlined by a broad band of colourful flowers. This is Stuart's doing. He tipped the seeds of orlea, corn chamomile, purple alliums, white opium poppies, scarlet field poppies, dark blue larkspur and pale blue clary sage into a bucket, mixed them with a little soil and scattered them in a broad strip along the edges of the tank. He has done something similar on sloping ground at the top of the garden, where a grass path winds through a meadow studded with cornflowers and corn chamomile. Stuart has made his experiments with wonderful flower mixes into a trademark. Angelo, who was trained by Stuart in the garden, admires his experimental approach. 'He is always playing,' he



says, 'always changing things so that there are generally parts of the garden in transition and other parts that are established and absolutely right.' Angelo may understand the style that Dan and Stuart sought to create now, but it wasn't easy to grasp at first. 'I wanted everything to look perfect,' he recalls, 'and I couldn't stand all the long grass.'

Steps lead down from the tank to a kind of crypt beneath the ruins of the house. Here there is another abrupt change of mood. Part of this sunken, subterranean room is sheltered by a vaulted roof and in the cave-like space beneath a huge bronze statue of Goliath shelters, sombre and eternally wounded by a stone from David's catapult. The strange, insect-like forms of *Geranium maderense* seem to pose an additional threat, stalking towards him across the enclosed space. Below Goliath's cave the water that Lauro brought to the garden emerges over a waterfall and forms a small lake that is loud with the discordant music of frogs. *Violante*

LEFT ABOVE The hairy stems of *Geranium maderense* illuminated by evening light.
LEFT BELOW A multicoloured ribbon of flowers surrounds the tank in the sunken garden, creating an abrupt change of atmosphere after the cool, pale colours of the upper garden.
BELOW Ferns thrive on copious supplies of water at La Torrecchia.





LEFT ABOVE Even on the hottest days of summer, the combination of lush foliage and pale flowers, such as this clematis *C. 'Marie Boisselot'*, seem to cool the air at La Torrecchia.

LEFT BELOW Wild poppies grow on a windowsill in one of the ruined houses of the village.

NEAR RIGHT A bench in the shade on the fringe of the garden.
FAR RIGHT Angelo, who stands in as head gardener while Stuart is away.



planted cherries on the water's edge, and Dan and Stuart planted stands of arum lilies and swathes of blue and white Japanese iris to light up the slope above the lake in spring, and crinum lilies to flower in June. 'That's the luxury of this garden,' Stuart says. 'We've enough space to have distinct areas that look stunning for a moment, and then do very little for the rest of the year.' In the old days, when Violante and Carlo filled the house with visitors, there was always some great visual event for them to witness in the garden, from January, when paper-white *Narcissus papaynceus* flowers in the long grass, to autumn when the wild cyclamen that Stuart has brought in from the woods carpet the ground. Both Stuart and Lauro have vivid memories of La Torrecchia when it was a centre of Italian cultural life. 'Every summer evening there

would be ten, twenty or even thirty people in the candlelight under the pergola,' Lauro says. 'There were poets, painters and writers. It was full of intellectual energy, just like Ninfa when Marguerite Caetani was alive.' Stuart is sure that La Torrecchia will always contain the memory of the people who made it. 'Whenever we do something new here,' he says, 'we ask ourselves if Violante would like it.' However, he is determined that the garden should have a future as well as a past, 'I would hate it to become a garden stuck in time'. No chance. Jacaranda would like to share the beauty of La Torrecchia by opening the garden to groups, and with Dan and Stuart at the helm, it will surely retain its position as one of the most ambitious modern gardens in Italy.

