

Great Gardens of Italy

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Rome

Torrecchia

My connection with Torrecchia is tenuous but personal. When I was beginning to make my own garden in Herefordshire in the mid-1990s I rang Pershore College to see if they had any students keen to do part-time work for me. Yes they said. They had just the fellow. Immensely keen, hard-working and a very nice chap to boot. They were right. He turned out to be Stuart Barfoot, then around nineteen and almost as fixated with gardens and gardening as I was. The children and dogs liked him too. It is always a good sign. Stuart moved on from college and I followed his career through the horticultural grapevine, hearing that he was working in Provence, Beirut and Italy. Glamorous stuff – but then he always was a cut above the average horticultural student.

At the same time a young, poetic garden designer was making his name. This was Dan Pearson and I remember filming him as he prepared for his first Chelsea show garden in 1994. From the first it was clear that Dan was a breath of genuinely exciting, albeit very refined and stylish, air into what was a rather staid British gardening establishment.

Two very wealthy Italians had visited Chelsea that year, seen Dan's work and decided that he was exactly the person that they needed to work on their garden. They were Prince Carlo Caracciolo, a newspaper magnate, and his wife Violante, sister of the billionaire industrialist and head of Fiat, Gianni Agnelli.

In 1990 Carlo Caracciolo had bought the 1,500 hectare estate of Torrecchia in Cisterna di Latini, sight unseen, about an hour south of Rome and a few miles north of Ninfa. He did not visit it for months but when he finally did both he and Violante fell in love with it. It is not hard to see why. The house is built in the ruins of a medieval castle and its satellite village, abandoned in the thirteenth century, which in turn is set in an astonishingly beautiful wooded valley. The five-kilometre drive from the road takes you through flower-filled meadows that beggar many a border and this incredible natural beauty sets the tone for the garden.

Cisterna di Latina

Carlo and Violante had the former granary converted to a house by the architect Gae Aulenti and asked Lauro Marchetti at Ninfa to make a garden around it and in amongst the ruins. Unlike Ninfa which evolved more or less steadily over a century, the Caracciolos wanted their garden as quickly as possible and were happy to spend what ever it took to attain that. Mature trees were planted, including three 80-year-old oaks. Lauro oversaw the installation of over 10,000 plants over four years but the demands of Ninfa were too great to give sufficient time to Torrecchia. This is when Dan took over the supervisory role and in 1998 he in turn hired a young but widely experienced Englishman to be Head Gardener. This was Stuart Barfoot.

Stuart did not know a word of Italian when he arrived, was naturally reserved and shy and one of the existing two gardeners was under the impression that he was coming as his assistant, which posed all kinds of linguistic and management problems, but he and the garden soon flourished.

I met Stuart – for the first time in fifteen years – and he took me to Torrecchia which is not open to the public. He no longer works there as a gardener but has set up his own design business and acts as consultant to the estate, visiting every month. You arrive at the fortifications of a large castle but no manicured neatness. There is none of the sub-hotel formality that can be the default position for many large houses. Through the gatehouse and in front of the converted granary everything is lush, slightly shaggy and very green. A touch of formality is held in the pomegranates underplanted with dozens of box balls but even they are fuzzy with new growth and unclipped in spring. "Those pomegranates were tiny when I arrived," Stuart told me. But then the hedges he helped plant in my garden are now twenty feet tall. As at Ninfa, the energy between vigorous growth and the slow decay of the buildings is what gives the garden its dynamic and, rather curiously, its harmony.

Although there is the whitest of white gardens with foxgloves, aquilegias, nicotiana, white valerian and an enormous white mock orange

flowering simultaneously – which of course they could never do in England – Stuart told me that “The idea is to let as many things as possible look as though they have seeded themselves.” So the steps round to the back are smothered with daisies, valerian grows out at angle from the base of the house and a white rose sprawls out halfway across the staircase. Although there is a whole northern European and American school of carefully managed, loose, informal planting it is challenging stuff if you are used to the order and symmetrical balance of most gardens. I asked what Italians made of it. “A lot of people don’t get it,” Stuart said. “I came here one morning to find a visitor weeding out all the flowers in the cobbles and I had to explain that I resowed them every year.”

When Stuart came he encouraged them to let as much grass as possible grow long, just mowing paths where necessary, and his latest addition to the garden is an annual wildflower meadow. When I was there in mid-May it was at its very best, filled with camomile, cornflowers and poppies with a narrow path arching through it. It is strimmed every September and raked up before being rotavated and resown anew each year. “The only slight problem,” Stuart said, “is that we have to keep the birds off until the seed has germinated. Other than that it is no work at all.”

A tiny stream raced down between mown grass and a border like a furious raingutter and we followed it to the large shell of a building which had a rectangular pool. The ground was speckled with *Allium christophii* and ‘Purple Sensation’ and mulleins and field poppies grew in the gaping window places framing the view out over the valley with its oak woods and flowery meadows. Instead of a path around the pool was an annual meadow, cut and resown every year. It is an inspired idea. Some seats were shaded by a vast wisteria. Around the walls were half a dozen huge terracotta pots with oranges, the soil of which also sprouted salvias and alliums doing their best to look like weeds. Everything, of course, was deliberate, nurtured and selectively tweaked to make it look as naturally overgrown as possible. There is no irony in this – after all, that is essentially what any gardening is –

fiddling with plants to make them look as you would wish. It may look slightly abandoned and scruffy but it didn’t come cheap. Apparently each pot cost 1,300 euros and needed a crane to hoist them in.

Down below is the lake with white water lilies and silver carp burping bubbles at us. It was originally made by Lauro but Dan and Stuart doubled it in size and damned the water to make cascades and then planted it with iris from Ninfa and great rafts of zantedeschia. The undergrowth reveals a grotto-like arched recess of square water entirely covered with pea-green algae. It is extraordinarily beautiful. “Four metres deep,” said Stuart. Beautiful and alarming. The woods come right up to the battlements of the garden and I asked if they had any particular pest problems. “Just wild boar and porcupine.”

It seems that the key to this garden is its relationship to the estate around it. Indeed I am sure that everyone connected to it would agree that nothing inside the walls is more beautiful than the landscape seen looking out from the garden. The great success is the harmony between those two landscapes, the tightly domestic and the broadly managed. There are obvious links – the fencing and stakes are from the chestnut woods, the cyclamen that flower in the grass in the autumn are all taken from the estate as are the narcissi that replace them in spring as well as the matteuccia fern that grows freely all over the shaded corners of the garden. But it is subtler than that. Despite – perhaps because of – the enormous walls and centuries of history, the landscape has grown into the garden and the garden has welcomed it and gone out to meet it half way. It shows what inspired patrons and brilliant young gardeners can do between them. The only irony is that the latter are British working in an Italian garden rather than Italians. Whilst I feel a flush of associated pride at seeing Stuart’s work, I also feel that it is a real regret that modern Italy values the skills of gardening so little. Its long and glorious garden history needs to be upheld not just by money and good taste but by intelligent, educated gardeners in love with the earth that they work.