



In the shade of a cork oak, foxgloves, honesty and aquilegia contribute to the garden's predominantly white colour scheme

Paradise regrown

The bewitching gardens of Torrecchia, with their crumbling medieval walls and towers, are home to some inspired romantic planting. Stephen Lacey falls under its spell. Photographs by Ferruccio Carassale

'I didn't speak a word of Italian, not even *ciao*,' said Stuart Barfoot, describing his nervous anticipation as he headed to Torrecchia in 1998 to take up the job of head gardener. He had not been there before, having been recruited in London by Dan Pearson, the garden's designer, and had only briefly met his new bosses, Prince Carlo Caracciolo, the founder of *La Repubblica* newspaper, and his wife, Violante, at the Berkeley Hotel.

'I remember being picked up from Rome airport at night in this huge BMW, and driving through some grotty towns with no clue where I was going. There were fields and woods, then a huge house with all its lights on, where a house party was in full swing. I woke up the next morning to find myself in a sort of 18th-century Arcadia, awesomely beautiful, and seemingly untouched by man.'

The 1,500-acre estate had been bought by Caracciolo seven years previously, sight unseen, with the intention of selling it on. But he and Violante, then in their sixties, loved what they found. In the foothills of the Apennine Mountains, an hour's drive from Rome (where they lived during the week), this was as sensuous as Italian landscapes can be: sun and cicadas; long-horned cattle grazing waist-high in wildflowers; cuckoos calling in the woods, and a stone archway seducing you into a medieval village, long-abandoned and encircling the house in crumbling walls and towers.

When they bought the estate the present house was the granary. To remodel it, the Caracciolos commissioned the architect Gae Aulenti, who had worked on projects for the Prince's sister, Marella, and her husband, Gianni Agnelli, the head of Fiat. To rescue the site from wilderness, and help to start a garden, they called on their neighbour and friend Lauro Marchetti, the curator of the naturalistic,

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English-influenced garden of Ninfa, which sits by a river on the plain below Torrecchia and is also made around the ruins of a medieval village.

And then, to take the garden to its full potential, they turned to Dan Pearson, whom they met on a visit to Chelsea Flower Show in 1994. With Pearson's sensitivity to atmosphere and sense of place, he was the perfect choice to develop the site, and by the time Barfoot arrived, his spaces, structures and plantings were maturing nicely.

'Dan came out to get me started and introduce me to everyone. There was another gardener here who, I soon realised, hadn't got the message that I was his new boss. I was 10 years his junior, unable to speak the language and not assertive, so it was tricky. Violante told me later that she never thought I would survive, being so English and timid.'

It was Violante who, with Pearson, decided on the ethos of the garden as one of romantic informality and cool colours, predominantly greens and whites, and this has been carried through with gusto. Sitting outside the dining-room under the large pergola, every beam dripping in the long racemes of white Japanese wisteria, is one of the most memorable and dreamlike experiences I have had in 30 years of visiting gardens. Other Pearson



flourishes include the repeated use of the blush-white rambler rose 'Madame Alfred Carrière', both free-standing in thickets and cascading down the walls with jasmines, trachelospermum and white solanum; and the entrance court where, passing under camphor trees, you climb the house steps from an enclosure made from clipped box balls and pomegranate trees.

The garden flows freely over the five acres of hilltop, but here and there are other intimate enclosures. In one of these, a sunken outdoor room framed by a tower and walls, Pearson had installed a water tank and pots of lemon trees. One of Barfoot's early projects was to establish a seed mix in the gravel around them, to fuel a carefree mood. 'I do it every September now, putting a little dry soil in a bucket, stirring in packets of white opium poppy, *Anmmi majus* [a miniature Queen Anne's lace], blue larkspur, love-in-a-mist, clary sage and all sorts of other things, and then scattering them about.' With tropical-blue waterlilies joining the lotus inside the tank during the summer, this garden soon became one of the prince's favourite places to unwind in after a week in Rome.

Following his horticultural training at Pershore College, Worcestershire, Barfoot, 34, had worked in private gardens in the south of France and in Lebanon, so he was already comfortable with much of the Mediterranean plant palette. 'But I was still learning a lot along the way. After six months I was conversing OK, and picking up a local accent.'

Flowering cherries had been planted by Marchetti and Violante between the Italian cypresses down the sloping lawns – white-blossomed *Malus*

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Above *Euphorbia palustris* flowers among the weeping cherries by the lake. **Below** a rose-covered arbour, partnered with a bed of *Hydrangea arborescens* 'Annabelle'. **Opposite** a curtain of wisteria screens one of the garden's cool sitting areas

'Evereste', bird cherry *Prunus padus* and the great white cherry, P 'Taihaku'. With Violante Barfoot introduced wild cyclamen and white daffodils, 'Thalia' and *Narcissus poeticus*, beneath them. 'As soon as I got to Torrecchia, I suggested letting the lawns grow rough in parts so we could have bulbs and wildflowers. Dan liked the idea too, but I remember him saying that when we had worked out how many bulbs we needed, to double it.'

Cancer ended Violante's life in the spring of 2000. 'She was a lovely person, with good taste,



strong opinions, and always considerate – sending us home if the weather got too hot. I hadn't had much contact with Carlo, and didn't know how involved he was going to be with the garden. He was here only on occasional weekends, but we started meeting on the odd Saturday morning to discuss things, and I would accompany him and his house guests on the garden tour. One day he surprised me, saying he had been to the flower show at Courson and bought some young handkerchief trees. He was delighted when they put on a metre of growth a year and flowered three years later.'

Pearson has continued to visit once a year, and under his direction, Barfoot set about improving the water garden. A garden such as Torrecchia



would be impossible in Italy without a reliable water source. Early on, a bore hole 110m deep had been sunk, and the water that was pumped up had been channelled by Marchetti into a stream that ran into a small lake. A waterfall and stepping stones were added, and the planting augmented. Osmunda ferns joined the carpet of blue and white *Iris japonica* by the lake, and the repeated stands of giant white arum (*Zantedeschia*) along the stream were joined by a tapestry of other ferns with white agapanthus, busy lizzies and hydrangeas.

Gradually, Barfoot has been initiating his own

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projects and designing his own layers of beauty into the garden, encouraged by Caracciolo. He has introduced many magnolias, notably M x *loebneri* 'Merrill' and 'David Clulow', to the lawns, and pots of scented plants, such as *Magnolia grandiflora* 'Little Gem', white ginger lily (*Hedychium coronarium*) and flamboyant *Epiphyllum cactus*, to the paved areas around the house. 'I collected seed of *Impatiens balfourii* [a busy lizzie relative with pink and white hooded flowers] in the mountains, and let it colonise the steps to the swimming-pool. And just below the house, I made a little meadow of white corn camomile and blue cornflowers, which is re-sown on rotovated ground every October.

Left Stuart Barfoot, who has been the head gardener since 1998. He is shortly to become the garden's curator.

Right the rose 'Madame Alfred Carrière' climbs one of the medieval walls that enclose the hilltop site



'The boss also asked me to introduce, cautiously, a little more colour into the garden to give more variety.' One of the loveliest spots to have received this treatment is the small formal orange tree garden, where the beds are now warmed up with the apricot rose 'Mrs Oakley Fisher', deep red snapdragons and vanilla-coloured English marigolds.

Caracciolo himself died in December, and now his daughter Jacaranda is at the helm. She is also deeply fond of Torrecchia. 'When you sit by the lake, with the irises in flower, looking at the water and the ruins, you lose all sense of time and space,'

she said. 'My father and Violante developed the garden with the enthusiasm of teenagers. For them, it was like building their dream on earth. I think in the future we must open the garden for people to see such a great work of art.'

Barfoot is now in London studying to become a freelance garden designer, but will return to Torrecchia later in the summer as its curator, working there one week a month. 'I feel part of the place now. I love that sense of the power of nature in the garden, and the feeling that man's presence and influence is only temporary here.' ■

Right pomegranate trees and box balls fringe the house's entrance courtyard

