



The Best Gardens in Italy

A Traveller's
Guide

Kirsty McLeod

Photographs by Primrose Bell

Introduction by Robin Lane Fox

Il Giardino di Torrecchia Vecchia

LATINA LAZIO



Left: The ruins of the medieval castle and village, abandoned for around 800 years, are the backdrop for an impressionist planting scheme, mainly in green and white.

The long drive up to Torrecchia unfolds along a nut avenue and then through meadows of wild flowers, backed by misty hills. The view opens out on to sunlit fields sprinkled with cornflowers, poppies and daisies, and then closes in again as the road travels through dark and mysterious woods. Huge trees loom overhead, bringing a sense of the valley closing in. At the end is a stone archway, and then the villa, once a seventeenth-century granary, surrounded by the thirteenth-century ruins of a castle and its surrounding village. Stuart Barfoot, the talented and artistic English head gardener who ran the gardens at Torrecchia Vecchia for ten years, remembers his first impression of them as of 'a sort of eighteenth-century Arcadia'.

In 1992 Prince Carlo Caracciolo, founder of the newspaper *La Repubblica* and brother of the well-known Italian gardening guru Marella Agnelli, bought, with his wife Violante, this 600-hectare/1,482-acre estate in the rolling, wooded hills of southern Lazio. It came with a hilltop of medieval ruins, abandoned for around 800 years, possibly because of malaria or after an earthquake. As the Caracciolo began to stabilize the crumbling walls and clear them of ivy, they discovered Roman remains.

All this warned them to tread lightly. Advice was sought from Lauro Marchetti, director of Ninfa (see page 209), the poetic and naturalistic garden that had been created around another medieval settlement down on the plain. For the wild, romantic garden she planned for herself within Torrecchia's ancient, girdling walls, Violante Caracciolo decided that she needed an Englishman's eye.

At the 1994 Chelsea Flower Show she met Dan Pearson, the English landscape designer known for his gentle, impressionistic planting and sensitivity to landscape. Together, they decided on the ethos of the garden. It

was to be mainly green and white with a touch of blue and pink – nothing overly sophisticated; a garden blurring at the edges into the countryside, and looking as if it could, at any moment, return to nature.

With 1.75 hectares/4 acres of gardens, ensuring a water supply was a priority. Lauro Marchetti had already sunk a borehole. Water was pumped from it into the stream that flows through the garden to join a newly made lake. Streams of blue and white *Iris japonica* pour like rivulets downhill towards this lake, where the cherry *Prunus pendula* 'Pendula Rosea' leans over to caress the water with its branches. At the top, where the water emerges, snowy white zantedeschia lights up the huge leaves of gunnera.

The Caracciolo had started planting around the ruins even before Dan Pearson arrived, putting in white wisteria, passiflora and white Banksian roses, which grew to tremendous heights in a few summers. Now, *Podnana riccioliana*, too, scales the ancient walls, along with *trachelospermum* and white *solanum*. Around the ruined castle, white hydrangeas bloom at the base of the walls. Banks of wild *Impatiens balfoorii*, its seeds collected by Stuart Barfoot in the mountains, soften the rugged stone. Inside the castle walls is a discreet swimming pool, from which patches of sky can be glimpsed through the broken tracery of the windows. At the back of the castle, wild white roses clamber up cypress trees and white *nicotiana* spreads like a skirt at their feet.

The villa's front courtyard is sheltered by a square of venerable pomegranate trees, successfully transplanted here despite their great age. In front of the guest quarters is another courtyard where pots of Madonna lilies, pale blue hydrangeas, citrus, daisies and erigeron flower. To the side of the villa, deep blue clematis is set off by an explosion of white *Rosa* 'Madame Alfred Carrière', which Dan Pearson has used repeatedly throughout the garden.

Ahead, a camomile path leads through a meadow of wild flowers. Down the slope, two beds outlined with box balls are filled with pale blue delphiniums and glowing apricot *R. Sans Souci*. This newly planted part of the garden has more than a hint of Englishness about it. Primulas, peonies, aquilegia, hostas and apricot foxgloves mingle in a soft-hued palette and, as an experiment, blue Himalayan poppies have been planted. To the left is a swooping view over a valley where long-horned Maremma cattle graze.

Once the garden's structure was in place, with a series of outdoor rooms and secluded retreats in which to take refuge from the intense Italian heat, Dan Pearson brought in Stuart Barfoot to run the garden. To maintain Torrecchia's unique and delicate atmosphere of sweet disorder hovering on just the right side of wildness is a supreme balancing act. Stuart took to it immediately, relishing 'the power of nature in the garden, and the feeling that man's presence and influence is only temporary here'. He has brought his own artistry to Torrecchia, starting a magnolia collection and establishing his own wildflower seed mix of larkspur, nigella and *Salvia sclarea* to scatter. He has introduced more bulbs, including white wild cyclamen and the aptly named *Narcissus poeticus*. In the shade of the old cemetery hostas, foxgloves and Candelabra primulas shelter beside *Hydrangea involucrata* 'Yoraku-Tama', introduced by Stuart. Much of the appeal of Torrecchia comes from small, tenderly maintained, secret corners such as this, which contrast with the grand sweeps of planting.

By the ruined wall and the tower which mark the ancient entrance to Torrecchia, towering banks of heavenly blue *Salvia uliginosa* spill across the grassy path. Opposite, huge swathes of white Banksia roses flower in profusion.

Carlo Caracciolo's favourite spot to relax after a week in Rome was the enchanting pool garden, made by Dan Pearson in the ruined chapel. In the central water tank lotus and water lilies grow, surrounded by self-sown poppies, huge *Salvia turkestanica*, pale blue larkspur and white valerian, billowing airily amongst the more formal potted lemons. Alliums sprout up by the score in spring. Through the ruined windows, with wild flowers growing in crevices on their sills, are views of the lush Lazio countryside.



A grassy lawn separates two June-to-September borders. In shades of blue and white, these contain *Romneya coulteri*, ceanothus, plumbago and oleander among drifts of nigella and agapanthus. Nearer the house, under a catalpa tree and a holm oak, datura grows happily with white hydrangeas, white foxgloves and Japanese anemones in the shade. A cascade provides the gentle sound of falling water and, to the side of the house, a magnificent winter showerers its long white racemes over the terrace.

Stuart Barfoot created a charming *orto* for the prince in response to his request for an area of more colour. In shades of deep crimson and soft apricot, it contains within its picket fence the single-flowered rose 'Mrs Chalky Fisher', penstemons, dahlias, *Allium sphaerocephalon* and single black opium poppies, lightened by the continually flowering David Austin roses Golden Celebration and Jude the Obscure. Against the walls behind, soft yellow jasmine, honeysuckle and the huge rambler rose 'Follette' echo the theme.

Violante Caracciolo died four years after Dan Pearson began to plan the garden. The prince lived on to see his davidias flower, dying in December 2009. His daughter Jacaranda now cherishes Torrecchia, ably advised by Stuart, who is now the garden's curator, staying and working there one week a month.

Stuart Barfoot sees his time at Torrecchia as a life-changing experience, during which he has learned to garden in tune with the natural landscape. *Selvatico-curato* is his name for the delicate task of maintaining the harmony between wild nature and control. Apart from advising at Torrecchia, he now designs gardens around the Mediterranean and in England. In his gardens, a romantic naturalism and fresh simplicity combine with an intuitive respect for the spirit of place.

Above A window in the ruined chapel, now the pool garden, looks out over the landscape.

Left The pool garden, where lotus and water lilies grow surrounded by self-sown poppies, *Salvia turkestanica*, pale blue larkspur and white valerian.

