

The Art of Gardening

Clark Lawrence

As an American gardener living in Italy, I have decided to contribute to *Engramma* with an English essay concerning the garden *as* art rather than the garden *in* art, concentrating mostly on contemporary Italian gardens and American parks, and a couple famous English gardens of the early 20th century. The value of gardens, both economical and cultural, is another topic that interests me greatly, so the latter part of this essay will deal with that difficult question: what is a garden worth?

On Thursday the 5th of September 2013 in a frescoed rococo room of Mantua's Palazzo Ducale known as the Sala dei Fiumi, there was a meeting and book presentation with the art historian and garden expert Guido Giubbini, and his wife Maria Laura Beretta. The talk was part of Mantua's Festaletteratura, and was moderated by the director of *Gardenia*, Emanuela Rosa-Clot. The books being presented were two large tomes entitled



Bramafam, Paolo Pejrone's home and garden, Revello (Cuneo), February 2014. Photograph: Clark Lawrence

Storie di Giardini (Garden Stories) that have the ambitious task of, as their jacket covers state, “describing and re-examining the history and art of gardens of the world”. Well, almost. They cover Giubbini’s world of gardens, which, in fairness, is much larger than mine or most people’s, but oddly totally excludes China and Japan, Australia, North and South America, and countless gardens many historians and experts would say must be a part of any ‘world history’ book of the art of gardens. The book’s detractors will immediately tell why there are such omissions: Giubbini has done nothing more than simply bind together his magazine articles about gardens he has visited from the past 15 years or so in book form, but for those who didn’t know him since he started writing about gardens, it is a great way to make up for lost time, as he is, without a doubt, one of Italy’s most important garden historians. For any Italian students or gardening and landscape professionals interested in the art and history of gardening, I am sure his *Storie di Giardini* will one day be considered a seminal work.

The first volume of *Storie di Giardini* includes gardens of Antiquity and Islam as well as European gardens of the 16th and 17th century. The second volume is subtitled *1800-1950: l’età d’oro del giardino borghese. Dal dopoguerra a oggi*. About 700 pages in all, well balanced between half text and half images. A note to readers of *Engramma* who aren’t familiar with the snobbery of some garden writers: if you publish something about gardens — not only a visual, but a three-dimensional, physical art form — with too many words and few or no images, you may be taken for a ‘garden philosopher’ (not a good thing) who is only writing for yourself and your cronies. No one will benefit by you ignoring the fact that gardens are about every sense — sight, sound, smell, touch and taste — and by excluding images and philosophising for pages, you do nothing to help spark an interest in your readers. On the other hand, if you publish big glossy books of flower or garden images with a few poetic words under them, you run the risk of being snubbed as a creator of ‘garden porn’ and pumping out nothing more than pretty coffee table books for the masses. It is difficult, when publishing anything about the art of gardens, to strike a balance between being too academic (and self-centered) and being too visual (and shallow). For my tastes, at least, Guido Giubbini has done very well: both the eyes and the mind are stimulated on every page.

Guido and Maria Laura, together with a small group of passionate gardeners, botanists, landscape architects, and garden historians, produce Italy’s finest gardening magazine, *Rosanova*. If you have not heard of it, you are not alone. You will not find it in any kiosk, and they do not advertise anywhere, nor do

they allow anyone to advertise in their journal, with one intelligent exception: the horticultural exhibitions that they attend, where they put up a little folding table and poster and hope to find new subscribers. Their internet presence is as quiet as their 'stand' at the garden fairs — reserved, to say the least. I appreciate the seriousness of *Rosanova* and admire them for their tenacity to keep their journal clean and far from the ugliness of advertisements, but their shyness and specialness borders on being anachronistic and self-defeating. They seem almost indifferent to taking full advantage of free advertising on the internet, where they might have a chance to find new and younger readers.

Despite the attractive glossy cover and colour illustrations throughout, *Rosanova* is best defined as an illustrated quarterly periodical, since 'magazine' (at least in English) brings to mind countless pages of advertising surrounding gossip and photos of models or movie stars — the kind of trash one might find in a dentist's waiting room or throw in the bin as you leave a train. Not so with *Rosanova*, also because an annual subscription will cost you 40 euro for four copies, and back issues cost even more. But back to our conference in Mantua. After the conversation on the stage ended, it was time for the audience to participate and, if they wanted to, ask questions. I only remember one question. A woman stood up, took the microphone, and asked Giubbini:

You have only spoken about Piet Oudolf and foreign gardens and gardeners during this entire presentation. If you couldn't mention Italy's most famous landscape architect and garden designer, Paolo Pejrone, who would you say is a leading gardener in Italy today — someone who others can look to for advice and inspiration?

Both she and Giubbini were mispronouncing this Dutch gardener's name, a small detail I found odd since Giubbini holds this famous garden designer and plantsman in such high esteem that he dedicates 18 pages of his second volume to Oudolf and the "Dutch Wave". By the way, I am fully aware that 'plantsman' is now an annoying, hackneyed term in English, used for anyone who has ever touched a plant, but Oudolf truly does know plants, has worked with them and run a nursery for years before designing gardens, and fully deserves the title. For the record: Piet is simply pronounced like the abbreviated form of Peter in English, "Pete", and his surname is OUT minus the "t", plus "dolf".

The answer: Giubbini just sat there silent for a few seconds and said "An Italian?" and then didn't give an answer... some people in the public started to laugh as he smiled, shrugged his shoulders, shook his head and said:

“Sorry. I don’t mean to be excessively negative or polemic, but nobody comes to mind. I fear you will have to look abroad for ideas and inspiration”.

Giubbini might have meant to be provocative, or maybe he was trying to end the conference with some giggles, but I didn’t laugh. Of course I didn’t expect to hear my name brought up as an exemplary innovative gardener and artist, and I was at least encouraged to hear my friend Paolo Pejrone mentioned as the ‘too obvious’ master that everyone already knows, but I was shocked that an historian and gardener like Giubbini could not think of even one young (or old) gardener who is doing something — anything — innovative and inspiring in the whole country. Not even the young Sardinian garden designer and landscape architect Maurizio Usai, who has contributed several times to *Rosanova*, came to mind. But Giubbini did explain *why* he couldn’t think of anyone, and I found his criticism interesting and partly true:

Of course there are many passionate and competent gardeners in Italy, but the more I visit them and get to know them personally, the more I see these people as isolated in their own passions and botanical worlds, ignoring what came before them, and too often not considering the landscape around them. There are many Italians with impressive collections of plants, but their gardens (if one could call them gardens — I am not sure I would) do not work as a unified whole, they are more like zoos or garden centers, and I would not consider these collectors artists, nor their collections art.

While reading Cecilia Mazzetti di Pietralata’s fascinating book on the historical gardens of Rome, *Giardini Storici. Artificiose nature a Roma e nel Lazio*, I was reminded of just how much collecting has been the heart of gardening for centuries. Habits are hard to break. In historic Italian gardens it wasn’t only a competition to see who could collect the most varieties of plants. There were sculptures to consider, fountains, frescoes, and wild birds and beasts in cages. ‘Hoarding’ might be a more appropriate term, as I can’t believe (nor do all of the antique garden plans testify) that it was always done artistically or with ‘buon gusto’. While visiting Carl Linnaeus’s garden in Uppsala, I asked our guide to the museum and garden a question she was almost ashamed to answer: what are those two big white birdhouses on poles in the middle of the garden? Monkey Houses. They were chained there, and could only climb up and down the metal poles, and hide in their houses four meters above the garden. Plant and animal hoarding was all the rage in other countries, as well.

Giubbini might have been exaggerating for dramatic effect (he likes to get your attention and hold it), but if he was even partially serious and correct in his observation, this ‘blind eye’ that Italian gardeners turn to the

surrounding landscape, and their ignorance (or intentional disregard) for an area's local history, its flora and fauna, is tragic. Doomsday for the Italian Garden. Why? Because that would mean that Italians are ignoring the fundamental, most important principles for any aspiring garden designer or landscape architect. These modern 'golden garden rules' are few, and far from new. They are time-tested, and have been passed down for over a century, beginning with gardeners like William Robinson (author of *The Wild Garden*, published in English in 1870 and, tellingly, published in Italian over 120 years later, by Franco Muzzio Editore in 1991)

It is difficult today to pick up an English language 'how to create a great garden' book without finding the same advice in the introduction, the same exact philosophical approach. The words change slightly, but the idea is always the same: before doing anything, just look around you. Try to learn from nature and understand the elements and the land that you are in. Hold back your own will and design ideas for just a moment, and consider the lay of the land, the climate, the local architecture and building materials, the distant and recent past. Then design and act accordingly. Also think about the near and distant future for what you are creating. This means the care



Maria Gabriella Bucciolli giving a garden tour at Casoncello, May 2011. Photo: Clark Lawrence

and maintenance of the garden, yes, but also means permanence of plants and materials. What will that tree look like in 100 years? And a relatively new idea, very fashionable and much spoken about in other countries, and often totally ignored in Italy: do the earth a favor, and tread lightly.

Easier said than done, to be sure, as landscapers and garden designers are not paid for (or even allowed to) 'hold back' and reflect for very long. Gardeners working on their own piece of land at home can take their sweet time thinking about what to do and how to do it, but clients want quick results, mature trees, 'instant' gardens. Designers (who are often far from knowledgeable 'plantsmen' like Oudolf) are expected to automatically know what is best for any place, and also how to incorporate their trademark style and plants that will thrive with the wishes and tastes of those commissioning the work.

As I sat there silently in the conference, I wanted to argue with Giubbini (not a good idea). I wanted to defend Italians as gardeners and artists. I was wishing I could come up with at least one exception; an Italian garden or gardener who one might consider a real artist. And then an Italian garden came to mind: the Reinhardt Garden, near Cortona, but alas, it no longer exists, and the creators, Thomas Reinhardt and his wife Martina Kofoth, are both foreign. I went to meet Thomas and Martina in February of last year, and sure enough the garden was no longer open to the public or even maintained. They were unsponsored and unsatisfied with how things were going politically (both locally and nationally), and were probably also affected by Italy's economic crisis, as they were hoping to sell the home they have built there, but couldn't find any buyers. The Reinhardts were no longer fully 'there' as gardeners of their land at Tuoro sul Trasimeno, but not moved out yet, either. Unfortunately, their reasons for abandoning the garden were not only political or economic. A few years ago, Thomas began suffering from an essential tremor and can no longer work in the garden enough to keep it as he wanted it. He is a perfectionist, and his very high maintenance garden came at a very high cost. It was manicured and kept pristine by a team of gardeners, and looked almost unnaturally perfect (but to my eyes fantastic!) when it was open to the public, as you can see on their website.

So, leaving his own outdoor creation behind him, Thomas went indoors, and back to his abstract art: big, bright, bizarre paper collages which might have some kind of cosmic significance — or not. Their tiny bright organic forms are glued to large sheets of paper, and sometimes look a bit like someone dropped a 1000 piece puzzle of random, pure coloured shapes,

and shifted them around until they were all flat and made some kind of pattern on the table.

Thomas sees his indoor art as somehow related to the gardening, and I personally am not able to see any correlation whatsoever between the two, but there is no doubt that their garden was very special, especially for Italy, and truly a plant lover's paradise. The Venetian garden historian Ida Tonini describes it like this in an on-line article for the Mediterranean Garden Society:

It is above all a work of art. Thomas Reinhardt, the grandson of the great theatre director Max Reinhardt, created this garden with the help of his young and beautiful wife, Martina, to flourish over one long season. Every year in March, the garden is planned and composed in collaboration with nature as if the land was an immense canvas over which colours were to be spread and combined. The vegetation reaches its greatest development and balance in the summer. Nature itself then dissolves the composition, like a Buddhist mandala, gently, with the arrival of early autumnal frosts.

Unfortunately we are too late to enjoy the magic and excitement of the Reinhardt Garden, based largely — at least in their tropical-looking area — on bold, ambitious plantings of annuals. This past November I learned of an Italian garden that I have never visited, but from what I have heard from friends and then seen and read in the internet and in a book mentioned below, I would consider it to be a work of art, and this time, *ha!* created by an



Piet Oudolf's Garden, Hummelo, the Netherlands, August 2012. Photo Clark Lawrence

Italian. The garden at Villa Bricherasio, in Saluzzo, Cuneo is very alive, but stable and settled, also because it is much older than the Reinhardt Garden and is grounded with maturing trees and perennials. Here the gardener, Domenico Montecvecchi, has spent nearly all of his life creating one of the most interesting botanical gardens in Italy. If you are like me and not so fond of the aseptic appearance and lack of personal touches of certain botanical gardens, do not fear. No one could consider this Eden a zoo or plant museum. This garden is enchanting and exciting, the result of many years of one man collecting, researching, and cultivating, but there is more. The garden is full of his energy and love of plants. Villa Bricherasio is relatively unknown outside gardening circles or its geographical area, and — not helping — the villa and garden do not have an official website. Nevertheless, just the cover photo for the Facebook page (with only 49 “likes” as I write this) shows a small image of the brilliant man who created it all and a larger image of what a lush paradise awaits its visitors. More photos (by garden designer Rosanna Castrini) may be seen here [facebook.com/photo](https://www.facebook.com/photo).

Some of the best illustrated gardening books and articles in Italian have one thing in common: Photographs by Dario Fusaro. *Un Giardino Coraggioso*, with Fusaro’s images and a text by garden designer Sandra Migliavacca is one of the finest new Italian ‘coffee table’ books about a garden published in recent years. If you are a plant lover, just pick it up and start flipping through the pages. Yes, it is plant porn, but with an intelligent, inspiring, personal text. There is no way you will be left unmoved.



The gardener and writer Maria Gabriella Buccioli has, since 1980, been creating a naturalistic garden in Scascoli, near Loiano, in the Appenines to the south of Bologna. The garden is just a hectare of mostly wooded hillside, including a bit of 20th century ruins; the foundation walls and bits of floor of her aunt's house, that was bombed in the Second World War. Her garden is like an enchanted, wild woodland, roses grow up through trees, digitalis thrive and bloom in mid summer in the light shade, thousands of cyclamen carpet the woods in September. Buccioli's garden is a shining example of what can happen when nature is not manipulated or forced to behave as we desire, but touched and coaxed by an artist. Where there are clearings and the sun shines brighter, there is a wealth of flowering bushes and shrubs, aromatic herbs, a happy, 'messy', flower-filled vegetable garden, a meadow full of wildflowers carefully inserted into the tapestry of native grasses and spontaneous plants of Emilia-Romagna, botanical specimens from around the world, all collected and cared for over more than three decades.

I feel fortunate to have met Gabriella Buccioli several years ago, and to have learned from her gentle approach to gardening. Now 73, she has dedicated about half of her life to her garden. She is an incredibly energetic and enthusiastic woman, who looks ahead. A few years ago she began thinking about the garden she had made and its future. How could the property be



Lawrence in the Hortus Horrei, Corte Eremo, Mantua September 2013. Photograph Myrice Tansini

maintained and preserved for future generations? The idea of a foundation was proposed, worked toward, and realised in December of 2011. One essential part of a foundation — a prerequisite, actually — is the existence of a private patrimony that someone decides to share with the public.

Un fondazione è un ente privato senza finalità di lucro, che ha a disposizione un patrimonio da destinare a determinati scopi: religiosi, culturali, educativi, scientifici o altri, costituita da uno o più fondatori.

But, in the case of Casoncello, are a couple little old houses and a hectare of jungly ‘wild’ garden enough of a patrimony to protect?

To do all of the legal paperwork necessary for the foundation, a commercial value of the Gardens of Casoncello needed to be put into writing. A professor from Bologna and specialist in agriculture, who who knew the garden and gardener well, found an easy answer, and declared that the Gardens of Casoncello were technically only worth their weight in wood. His appraisal stated rather dryly that the property would be worth more if it were covered with a slow-growing cash crop, like oaks, chestnuts, or walnut trees.

A second opinion and appraisal was immediately looked for and fortunately obtained. It included a 30 page report with detailed plant list, photographs, plans, and a study determining the value the garden has already added to the community and its potential for growth — for school groups, university research, tourism, recreation. The second estimate was 250.000 euro higher than the first. These two vastly different estimates prove how difficult it is to attribute a commercial value to a garden. Is every garden unique and somehow priceless? Or are our beloved little patches of green worthless?

Whatever their value, they all inevitably cost plenty to create and maintain, and in one case I can think of, while the garden is costing millions of dollars to make and to keep up, it is making even more. Property values of the buildings near this new garden are soaring. One of the most celebrated urban gardens of recent years is the Highline in New York City. From one hectare of wild garden in the rolling hills above Bologna to 1,45 miles of abandoned train tracks in the Big Apple, the numbers change. Thousands of euro become millions of dollars, and millions of people get involved. Straight from their website is this description:

The High Line is a public park built on an historic freight rail line elevated above the streets on Manhattan’s West Side. It is owned by the City of New

York, and maintained and operated by Friends of the High Line. Founded in 1999 by community residents, Friends of the High Line fought for the High Line's preservation and transformation at a time when the historic structure was under the threat of demolition.

The idea was brilliant, but not new. The Highline wasn't the first urban park to be made out of an abandoned elevated train line — that was the Promenade Plantée of Paris. But in typical American fashion, the New Yorkers wanted to do it better, and then the city of Chicago wanted to do it bigger (2,7 miles) and soon they will inaugurate their 53.7 million dollar Bloomingdale Trail and Park. They are excited and proud, as the two-minute video shows.

But back to New York: what you will not find without digging around in the High Line website is the name of the man behind the plants. Who chose what should be planted where? Oudolf is mentioned in the small print on the last line of a page entitled "Planting". Gardeners (even famous ones like Oudolf) probably don't mind being hidden in the small print. They are quite used to it.

A painting is often better known and recognised by its creator's name, than by its title. What matters most is who made it. More people could guess that *Les Femmes d'Alger* is 'a Picasso' than know its French title. Watch the video to learn, in less than two minutes, that those famous ladies of cubism are not from Avignon, France (as I had always imagined until today), but rather five prostitutes from Barcelona.

A Garden, on the contrary, is known by its place name more often than by the name of who made it, no matter how well respected or important their creator may be. Sissinghurst may be an exception, because Vita Sackville-West was already well known as a writer, but most gardens (the best gardens, I would add) are more about place than person. It is as if the gardener and garden have become one. If you want to be remembered by name as an artist, try your hand at painting, but don't become a gardener.

The garden at Hidcote Manor was started over twenty years before Sissinghurst, and is one of England's most famous gardens, so first let's learn how to say it, because, as with so many place names in England, it is pronounced nothing like how one might imagine or guess. Think the past tense of "nascondere" (hid) and add the present tense of "tagliare" (cut) and you'll do well enough to be understood during your visit to the Cotswolds.

Who designed it? Who knows? Who cares! The National Trust link below will tell you if you are interested, but my point is “Isn’t it incredible?” A man can dedicate over four decades (1907-1948) to creating a garden and a serious study of plants, truly create a work of art that is “often described as the most beautiful garden in England... a jewel in England’s horticultural history”, “One of the world’s most influential gardens” yet still die (and rest) in relative obscurity! His name, a name I remember for personal reasons, is so much less important than the green, living legacy that he left behind.

Clark Lawrence is the founding president of the cultural association *Reading Retreats in Rural Italy*, located in Corte Eremo, Curtatone, Mantua (www.corteeremo.com). Over the past 20 years in Italy, he has become, by passion, chance, and circumstance, a gardener. He has written twice for the English gardening quarterly, *Hortus* edited by David Wheeler (www.hortus.co.uk).

His garden at the Castle of Galeazza appeared in the magazine *Giardinantico* in February 2009 (www.casantica.net) and in the April 2011 issue (Number 24) of *Rosanova* (www.rosanova.net) as well as in an episode of “Fuga dalla Città” on Leonardo TV.

The earthquakes of Emilia Romagna in May of 2012 destroyed the Castle of Galeazza and much of its gardens, and forced Lawrence to move out. The garden’s blog is (www.galeazza-garden.tumblr.com).

Over the summer, with the help of foreign and Italian friends, he took his 6,000 books, 200 paintings, pianos, almost 1,000 plants and seven small goats to a new rural location, and is starting a new project and garden at Corte Eremo. The new garden blog is www.hortush-orrei.tumblr.com. The story of the death of the Galeazza Garden and its rebirth was covered in an article by Arch. Paolo Pejrone, *La Stampa* 24 August, 2012.

Books

Guido Giubbini, *Storie di Giardini*, Adarte SRL, Torino 2012

Cecilia Mazzetti di Pietralata (a cura di), *Giardini Storici. Artificiose nature a Roma e nel Lazio*, Gangemi Editore, Roma 2009

William Robinson, *Il Giardino Naturale* [*The Wild Garden*, London 1870], trad. it. Marta Suatoni, Franco Muzzio Editore, Padova 1991

Sandra Migliavacca e Dario Fusaro, *Un Giardino Coraggioso*, Cremonabooks, Parma 2011

Maria Gabriella Buccioli, *I Giardini Venuti dal Vento. Come ho costruito il mio giardino “secondo natura”*, Edizioni Pendragon, Bologna 2003

Anna Pavord, *Hidcote Manor Garden*, National Trust, Great Britain 1993

Graham Pearson and Anna Pavord, *Hidcote*, Anova Books, United Kingdom 2013

WEBSITES AND LINKS

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