



The Best Gardens in Italy

A Traveller's
Guide

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Il Giardino della Cannara

VITERBO, LAZIO

Water from nearby Lake Bolsena rushes through this romantic, 0.8-hectare/2-acre plantsman's garden, flowing underneath the house, whose ancient stone walls are hidden by greenery and tumbling roses. Since Etruscan times there has been an eel fishery here to trap the eels making their way from Lake Bolsena to mate and die on the other side of the world in the Sargasso Sea. Massimo and Mirella Faggiani, who live and garden here, still use the 2,000-year-old Etruscan fishing system, by which fish – mainly carp and eel – are beached on a trap in the fast-flowing river.

This is a garden, almost English in spirit, that revels in its luxuriant planting. At its entrance is a fine *Hydrangea quercifolia*. *Clematis* 'Hagley Hybrid' and 'Blue Boy' entwine themselves through a line of cypresses. A string of Lombardy poplars (*Populus nigra* 'Italica') are linked by swags of *Rosa banksiae*, a decorative device seen in a Pompeian fresco of a Roman garden.

Mirella, a former music teacher, 'gardens by day and thinks and dreams at night'. Her garden, once a retirement hobby, is now a place of pilgrimage

for all the Italian garden clubs, who venerate her knowledge and enthusiasm for plants. Plants of every variety are crammed into every corner of her garden. *Rosa* 'Mermaid' grows up trees. An old car park has been planted with the ponytail grass (*Stipa tenuissima*). A huge *Romneya coulteri* has a petticoat of the pink evening primrose (*Oenothera speciosa*). A bed of roses and peonies is softened by gauzy, arching sprays of *gaura*. *Kolkwitzia amabilis*, *Robinia pseudocacia* 'Frisia' and roses 'Buff Beauty', Graham Thomas and 'Golden Wings' anchor a blue, yellow and white border, where euphorbias spring up spontaneously. Mirella grows many of her plants from seed (from Chiltern Seeds and Thompson & Morgan), including penstemons and the beautiful and rare blue angel's trumpet tree (*Lochroma australe*), now 3 metres/10 feet high, as well as a fifteen-year-old coral tree (*Erythrina crista-galli*), which has survived the winters here to reach 9 metres/30 feet.

Mirella's love for roses is evident. They sprawl and tumble everywhere – *R.* 'Cécile Brünner' cascading down the riverbank, *R.* 'Kiftsgate' frothing over the bridge. First to flower is the white *R. banksiae*, covering the walls of the house in spring blossom.

Along the riverbanks arum lilies, papyrus and bamboo grow, with flag iris and the water iris (*I. ensata*). Here and there, *Ceanothus thyrsiflorus* var. *repens* flashes its vivid blue. Further back, daturas, hydrangeas, *Paeonia ostii* and a host of woodland plants take shelter in the shade. There is more vivid blue from *Scilla peruviana*, and the lapis-lazuli hues of *Allium caeruleum*. Mirella keeps a viburnum collection and cherishes a bed of salvias. Among her other treasures is the Mexican tiger flower (*Tigridia pavonia*), a half-hardy South American diva whose beautiful flowers last a day only.

For winter Mirella favours sweet-smelling shrubs, but such is her touch that plants bloom here well past their flowering periods. *Calycanthus* shows off its blossoms in January, while the giant tree dahlia (*D. imperialis*) adds a theatrical note to the winter scene.



Top At the centre of this flower-filled garden is an eel fishery dating from Etruscan times, fed by water from Lake Bolsena on its way to the Sargasso Sea. Bottom Cypresses provide structure in this luxuriously planted garden.