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A Hermitage Garden. The Herb Garden of Rio nell'Elba, Tuscany

Abstract

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This is a short description of the Herb Garden (*Orto dei Semplici Elbano*) of Rio nell'Elba. Dedicated to the cultivation of endemic or significant plants of the Tuscan Archipelago, it was also created to save varieties of fruit trees typical of the island of Elba, such as some grapevines, fig trees, plum trees, etc. The garden is placed in an area adjacent to an ancient hermitage dedicated to Saint Catherine of Alexandria that has become an important cultural centre for the promotion of scientific activities - botany in particular - as well as the arts, literature and music. The garden has been open to the public since 1996.

Key words: Endemic flora, Science communication, Tuscany.

Introduction

I am going to talk to you about a Botanic Garden dedicated to spontaneous and rare flora of the Tuscan Archipelago and about an orchard comprising ancient varieties of fruit trees of the island of Elba. I will tell you about a rose garden hidden in the ancient *hortus conclusus* of the remote Hermitage of Santa Caterina, for centuries a place of worship for the Riesi, the inhabitants of a small town of medieval origins on the island of Elba, for centuries inhabited by many miners, a few farmers and some shepherds, up to the end of mining in the 1960's.

"To create a garden, following its development, living and working in it; offering it to friends as a meeting space, promoting its knowledge, growing beautiful and rare plants in it, inspiring the creation of poems and novels, to save memories and works of art are among the deepest and most fulfilling pleasures of an entire life."

These are the words used by Hans Georg Berger, a writer, man of letters and photographer of Trier, the ancient city of Rhineland-Palatinate, founded by the Romans in 16 BCE, on the banks of the German Moselle. Hans Berger arrived at the Hermitage of Santa Caterina on a day when the north wind was blowing, in January 1977. The ancient building was abandoned, surrounded by the maquis: some signs of the shepherds and their sheep; no visible trace of agriculture, no tree. The collapsed side walls covered with thorns to the north, an imaginary wall to the west, the distant wall of water of the Tyrrhenian Sea.

After many on-site surveys lasting several years, Hans understood that the Hermitage was located in a place once rich of fields, orchards and vineyards, that a *hortus conclusus* once existed, a place of spiritual retreat and where the Hermits grew useful plants (Fig. 1). In 1988, after cleaning, reconstruction and restoration of some walls, the Hermitage Garden could host the first trees. Hans planted there some roses from the garden of his home in Trier and from the famous rose garden of Sangerhausen, in Turingia. He settled at the Hermitage, started to host people of letters, philosophers, writers, urbanists, historians, poets, artists and researchers. Without running water, without electricity - still lacking up to this very day - staying at the Hermitage represents a spiritual retreat, but also a challenge marked by all types of weather, by simple food and by rough rest. I met Hans Berger in 1990: he came to see me at the Botanic Garden of Pisa, he told me about his passion for ancient roses and invited me to the Hermitage where I went with my wife Gabriella Corsi (1936-1999), then Professor of Pharmaceutical Botany at Pisa University: she was following a student's degree thesis on the Riesi wild food and medicinal plants. We visited the rose garden, the Hermitage and its surroundings, and we suggested to Hans to create a Botanic Garden where the most significant plant species of the Tuscan Archipelago and the fruit varieties typical of the island of Elba would be grown for didactic, scientific, and cultural purposes and for the *ex-situ* conservation of the plants threatened by extinction.

I prepared a draft on how to set up the herb garden and after some restoration works in 1996 the Garden of the Hermitage of Santa Caterina was opened to the public. Architects Roberto Gabetti and Aimaro Isola, from the Turin Politecnico, designed walls and new spaces. The Italian Botanical Society gave its scientific support.



Fig. 1. The Hermitage of Santa Caterina near Rio nell'Elba, Tuscan Archipelago.

A short walk on a small street flanked by cypresses leads to the entrance to the garden, that took the name *Orto dei Semplici Elbano* (Fig. 2). Placed at 260 m above sea level, it covers about one hectare, spread over different levels. The area is organized into a dozen thematic sections, divided into spaces bordered by structures made of local lime stone, tuff or wood (Fig. 3). A pergola features the seven traditional grape varieties of the island: Ansonica, Sangiovese, Alicante, Moscato, Biancone, Procanico and Aleatico. The latter is typical of Elba: since the fifteenth century, the Medici Dukes greatly appreciated the *passito* wine made from it.

Then, in a section devoted to the psammophilous flora of the sand dunes, the visitor finds: sea rocket (*Cakile maritima*), cotton lavender or sand yarrow (*Achillea maritima*), sea lily (*Pancratium maritimum*), Mediterranean stock (*Matthiola tricuspidata*), sea chamomile (*Anthemis maritima*), convolvulus or morning glory (*Calystegia soldanella*), horned yellow poppy (*Glaucium flavum*), etc.

Other species considered sacred or symbolic in ancient times are planted as well: laurel, pomegranate, myrtle, lavender, rue, and others. Today, the essential oil of *Ruta chalepensis*, a frequent presence in the surroundings of the Hermitage, is being studied and experimented as an antiparasitic.

A space is reserved to plants traditionally cultivated in Elba's gardens: lemons, bergamots, oranges, cedars, as well as ornamental species such as the glycine, acanthus, dwarf palm, and other rhizomatous and bulbous plants.



Fig. 2. The entrance to the Orto dei Semplici next to the church of Santa Caterina.

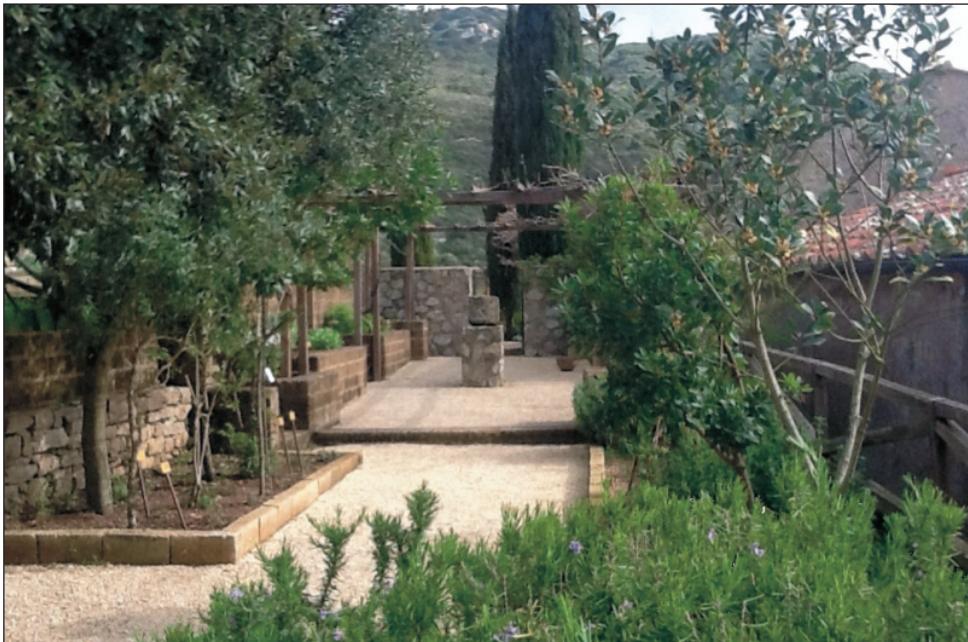


Fig. 3. An aspect of the Orto dei Semplici with tufa tubs.

The name “labyrinth” indicates the most remarkable area of the Herb Garden. It is made up of tanks in tufa, where traditional medicinal and food plants still used on the island of Elba are cultivated.

There is also a “butterfly garden”; it is extremely valuable for educational purposes, because it allows learning more about *lepidoptera* and other pollinators, attracted by the various polliniferous and nectariferous species. There are also some beehives, which are taken care of by a passionate local apiarist who keeps watch and does the maintenance of the Garden.

A study started in 2000 led to the identification of a considerable amount of fruit varieties, once cultivated on the island but at present either abandoned or in danger of extinction. A project financed by the Tuscany Region through the Regional Agency for the Development and Innovation in the Agricultural and Forestry Sector, made it possible to recover more than 60 varieties of pome fruits, stone fruits and mulberry species, planted in a specific terraced area. Many of these varieties of apple, plum, pear, cherry, peach, almond, fig trees (Fig. 4), etc., represent the century-old popular tradition of the island's gastronomy. During a recent meeting, some farmers, traders, agricultural and tourism operators as well as 22 caterers from Elba signed an agreement to create food and agriculture chains to offer a “basket of Elban products” to consumers.

Obviously, many endemic species of the Tuscan Archipelago for which the garden was initially created are cultivated. There are about 1600 vascular plants populating the Archipelago (the Galapagos Islands have 570); among them, the endemic plants are to be



Fig. 4. A cultivated variety of fig, called “fico popone” in a watercolor by E. Zito.



Fig. 5. Saint Catherine of Alexandria treats a wounded unicorn (engraving by Neri Torrigiani).

of the germplasm, recognized at local and regional levels and by the National Park of the Tuscan Archipelago.

In 2019 the garden has become part of the National Park of the Tuscan Archipelago; its activity is under the Unesco Biosphere scheme. The scientific direction is entrusted to the Department of Biology and Botanic Garden of the University of Pisa.

I have told you about the Herb Garden, the fruit garden, and the endemic plants. But at the beginning I mentioned the rose garden, hidden within the walls of the ancient *hortus conclusus*. In a small volume printed in Bangkok, Thailand, but written in Luang Prabang in Laos, where he lives and works in a community of Theravada Buddhist monks, Hans Berger drew up a *Botanic and Sentimental List*, as he called it, of the roses in Santa Caterina.

He recalls the origin, the flowering with its colors, the vegetation and cultivation characteristics of about one hundred varieties.

It is a small guide for passionate gardeners as well as a tribute to the flowers that have inspired poems and literary compositions, novels and plays, music and deep feelings in millions of people all over the world. For Hans, a gardener, orderer and demiurge called to cultivate the ethical myth of beauty, the rose garden is a *hortulus animae*, an intimate place that has been restored, waiting for the flowering like an epiphany of beauty.

The Hermitage of Santa Caterina is still a place of worship, but also has become a place for artists, poets and people of letters. The church, visited by Napoleon Bonaparte on 6

considered the finest and most important expressions. There are about thirty endemic species hitherto identified, some of them recently or very recently recorded. Some of their Latinised names reveal their distribution: *Linaria caprina* (Capraia Island), *Limonium ilvae* (Elba Island), *Limonium planasiae* (Pianosa Island), *Limonium gorgonae* (Gorgona Island), *Centaurea aetaliae* (from the ancient Latin name of Elba), *Crocus ilvensis*, and *Viola ilvensis* (Elba Island). There are also sub-endemic or relict specimens, some of them related to the system of Sardinia and Corsica, such as *Gennaria diphylla*, *Saxifraga corsica*, *Arenaria bertolonii*, *Genista desoleana*, and *Mentha requienii*; the dwarf palm (*Chamaerops humilis*), very rare in the Tuscan Archipelago, is of a relict nature.

The agriculture biodiversity, testified by the cultivated varieties mentioned before, is coupled with the autochthonous plant biodiversity: both are represented in the Herb Garden, which therefore plays an extraordinary role in the conservation

May 1814, today hosts exhibitions of sculpture and painting, concerts of contemporary music, and theatrical performances. An important event was the exhibition of a Carolingian parchment discovered in a codex with the statutes of Rio nell'Elba, dating back to 1605 and kept in the town's municipal library. It is a comment on psalms 30 and 31 by St. Augustine, bishop of Hippo in Africa since 395. The discovery was made by Peter Zahn from the University of Berlin. Painters Sarah Pickstone, Duncan Bullen, Thomas Wezcerek, Gianluca Gori, Karl Oppermann created extensive work at Santa Caterina and held exhibitions in the Hermitage; Thai artists like Surapon Saenkum and Yannawit Kunchaethong illustrated this place in their paintings. 30 leading Japanese calligraphers dedicated their works to the hermitage. Susanne Besch, a German ceramist and sculptress, created art works made with the remains of the iron worked in the island's mines. It is impossible to enumerate the concerts, exhibitions, and encounters held in this unique and magic place. For example, at the beginning of June 2019 the Sicilian botanical artist Elena Zito exhibited her watercolors of some selected Italian plants in the church of the Hermitage, followed by the delicate photographs of the Elban Andrea Lunghi, titled "Tacet". During starry nights in this place without electricity, the guests can appreciate the "silver garden" created by Daniel Mount, an American botanist and gardener, with plants with snow-white leaves such as *Centaurea gymnocarpa*, *Jacobaea maritima*, *Achillea maritima*, *Lobularia maritima*, and others. During the day, walking along the paths, visitors come across twenty-four large clay cubes arranged in the grass. They bear the engraved names of friends and supporters of the Santa Caterina Garden: the writer Hervé Guibert, the philosophers Norberto Bobbio and Michel Foucault, the architect Roberto Gabetti, the botanist Gabriella Corsi and others who passed away. These "signs of memory and silence", are created by a Piedmont artist, Cesario Carena. Other works by Carena grace the garden celebrating the power of Nature: mother earth generating life.

This is the short but intense story of the Herb Garden of Rio nell'Elba. We have mentioned art, the site's spirituality, the simple beauty of a peaceful place where the spirit flows in freedom. Where, in a drawing, St. Catherine of Alexandria, virgin and martyr worshipped both by the Catholic and Orthodox Church, the patron of writers and philosophers, is portrayed while she is rescuing a unicorn wounded in the rose garden of the Hermitage (Fig. 5). The Saint is celebrated on November 25th; in France, it is considered the date to plant trees ("A Sainte Catherine, tout prend racine"). Many plants have taken root in the garden of the Hermitage. The hope is to see them there for a long time.

Appendix

Here the scientific names of all the plants considered as endemics, sub-endemics, relicts or phytogeographically and ecologically relevant for the Tuscan Archipelago. Some of them, as previously mentioned, are growing in the beds of the Garden.

Arum pictum L. fil.; *Biscutella pichiana* subsp. *ilvensis* Raffaelli; *Borago pygmaea* (DC.) Chater & Greuter; *Brassica procumbens* (Poir.) O.E. Schulz; *Carex microcarpa* Bertol.; *Centaurea aetaliae* (Sommier) Bég.; *Centaurea gymnocarpa* Moris & De Not.; *Centaurea ilvensis* (Sommier) Arrigoni; *Chamaerops humilis* L.; *Cneorum tricoccon* L.; *Crocus ilvensis* Peruzzi & Carta; *Cymbalaria aequitriloba* (Viv.) A. Chev.; *Festuca gamisansii* subsp. *aethaliae* Signorini & Foggi; *Gagea bohemica* (Zauschn.) Schult. & Schult. fil.; *Galium caprarium* Natali; *Genista desoleana* Vals.; *Gennaria diphyllea* (Link) Parl.; *Hypericum hircinum* L. subsp. *hircinum*; *Limonium gorgonae*

Pignatti; *L. ilvae* Pignatti; *L. montis-christi* Rizzotto; *L. planasiae* Pignatti; *L. sommierianum* (Fiori) Arrigoni; *Linaria capraria* Moris & De Not.; *Mentha requienii* subsp. *bistaminata* Mannocci & Falconcini; *Pancratium illyricum* L.; *Ptilostemon casabonae* (L.) Greuter; *Ranunculus bullatus* L.; *Romulea insularis* Sommier; *Sagina revelierei* Jord. & Fourr.; *Saxifraga caprariae* Mannocci, Ferretti, Mazzoncini & Viciani; *S. montis-christi* Mannocci, Ferretti, Mazzoncini & Viciani; *Scrophularia trifoliata* L.; *Sedum brevifolium* DC.; *Silene badaroi* Breistr.; *Soleirolia soleirolii* (Req.) Dandy; *Stachys glutinosa* L.; *Stachys salisii* Jord. & Fourr.; *Urtica atrovirens* Req. ex Loisel.; *Viola corsica* subsp. *ilvensis* (W. Becker) Merxm.

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