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Villa Medici, designed to take advantage of its view of Florence, is considered to be the first Renaissance garden.

Under the Tuscan thumb

Where there's a villa, there's a way, says Marin landscape designer

by Annie Spiegelman

The Italian garden does not exist for its flowers; its flowers exist for it... It's hard to explain to the modern garden lover, whose whole conception of the charm of gardens is formed of successive pictures of flower loveliness, how this effect of enchantment can be produced by anything so dull and monotonous as a mere combination of clipped green and stonework.—Edith Wharton

dent of the Marin Audubon Society. Together they traveled throughout picturesque villages visiting historic villas and breathtaking Tuscan countryside. As Edger says, "Ah, yes. We lived the good life."

Last month, Marin landscape designer Cathy Edger organized an Italian lunch and slide show at Villa Roma restaurant in Novato, displaying some of the 5,000 photographs she had taken on her September tour of Italian gardens.

Edger met up with her fellow APLD members in Milan and then traveled to Lake Como, Tuscany and Florence, usually visiting two gardens a day. The gardens ranged from the early Renaissance period beginning in the 15th century through the Romantic period at the start of the 19th century.

The Association of Professional Landscaper Designers (APLD) arranged this two-week tour of various villa gardens throughout Italy. It was the perfect way to spend a rainy Sunday afternoon—gourmet pizza, Sangiovese wine from West Marin's West Wind Wines and a plethora of glorious photographs of Italian landscapes. Everything was going just swell until I learned that some of these mammoth Tuscan villas were created merely as retreats from public life in the busy city—vacation homes for rich peeps.

Most of these formal gardens had various forms of a *parterre*—a French word referring to a formal garden construction on a level surface, consisting of stone walls, tightly clipped hedges, gravel paths and various geometrically arranged planting beds. "Spaces were very rectilinear, not a lot of curves were used. Villa Medici at Fiesole showed

AFTERNOON IN ITALY

Cathy Edger will be showing the "Afternoon in Italy" slide show on Earth Day (April 22) at the Belvedere-Tiburon Library, 1501 Tiburon Blvd. 415/789-2665. Visit www.thelibrary.info for more details closer to the date.

the simple structure of the Renaissance period," says Edger. "Large rectangular lawns with potted lemon trees and gravel walkways were common. Nothing was arbitrary or haphazard. Geometrically planted boxwood, Magnolia or green woody shrubs filled each terrace. A lot was done using a rather limited variety of plants."

At Villa Torrigiani, near Lucca, differ-

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HOME + GARDEN DESIGN

ent geometric shapes were evolving in the landscape design, an expression of Baroque culture. Curves were slowly being introduced and gardens were becoming more showy and theatrical. Double staircases that create a diamond shape leading to a lawn or parterre were becoming more common. Sunken gardens that would shield you from wind were found as well. "Potted citrus in clay pots were common. Citrus was considered medicinal to prevent scurvy. Most Italian cooking did not use lemon," says Edger. "When it was too cold for citrus to be outside in the winter months, all pots would be moved into the *limonaia*, an indoor structure." To deal with the summer heat, a tunnel of shrubs was created, sometimes 100 feet long, or Grecian laurel-bay trees were trained over a framework to create a shaded walk. "These gardens, even with all the stone and the materials used, have stood the test of time. They are actually sustainable in the sense that good design stands the test of time. Those are the most sustainable gardens. This impresses on me how important it is to get the structure of the garden right."

Formal-looking stone pavilions, walkways or staircases sometimes hid a surprising feature, one that her group experienced. "Surprisingly, those people we have all assumed to be so formal and stuffy would hide water jets in paved surfaces and then surprise attack; turning them on unsuspecting visitors! These were called "water jokes," says Edger, looking mischievously at her audience.

Villa Reale Marlia, also near Lucca, is a garden that spans two eras, first Baroque and then Romantic. During the latter, gardens became more naturalistic; adorned with rare plants, sculpture and water features. Exotic plants imported from China and Japan via Great Britain were considered a status symbol. Here the garden designers tried to replicate gardens in landscape paintings. Wide pathways and shrubs were allowed to assume their natural shape.

"The park ranger in me would love to create an Italian garden here in Marin using



COURTESY OF CARRY EDGER, LANDSCAPE DESIGNER

Boxwood, clipped into a variety of shapes, are commonly found in Italy's Baroque gardens; these shrubs were often used to complement the design of the family chapel.

California natives that you would have to water deeply only once a month. I think it's a very doable proposition," says Edger. She recommends gravel surfaces for the garden's hardscape and believes this is one of the easiest and most sustainable things homeowners can do to emulate the Italian garden. Adding gravel surfaces keeps the water on the site and reduces runoff into the bay. If installed properly, with the correct base, gravel can be a very firm walking surface. "There are wonderful colors to choose from. My personal favorite is Salmon Bay. It's beautiful against sandstone or terra cotta. For the outside of the parterre I would plant low-growing cultivars of Baccharis, ceanothus or manzanita. For the interior, maybe a groundcover sage, California fuchsia or for a long season of color and fragrance, Verbena lilacina 'De La Mina.' A tree such as a Chilopsis linearis or a large manzanita, or a buckeye could be part of the composition. You could mix it all up creating a beautiful and sustainable space.*

Trim Annie's hedges at Annie@dirtdiva.com.



THE DIRT DIVA SPEAKS!

Don't miss the Dirt Diva Annie Spiegelman in "An Organic Conversation" with Helge Hellberg this Saturday, Feb. 13, at 10am on Green960AM, or streaming online at green960.com. After it airs, the episode will be uploaded to www.anorganicconversation.com and iTunes as a podcast. Annie's magnum opus, *Talking Dirt*, a down-to-earth guide to organic farming, is due in stores Feb. 23. Get it quick...before the spring gardening season begins! Your plants will thank you for it...



COMING SOON Mark the date, you flower junkies! The San Francisco Flower & Garden show is back.

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