

## A Tuscan Garden of Earthy Delights in Montepulciano

Story by Claudia Flisi

*When an Italian landscape designer turns inward to build a sustainable garden paradise for his wife, it turns into something grand for visitors to Tuscany's wine country.*



Merlin was the unofficial guide for our tour of Parco Villa Trecci just outside Montepulciano, a wine town in the heart of Tuscany. Black hooded with a patch over one eye, Merlin was surprisingly limber and light on his feet as he led us through the three-hectare expanse of greenery. But it was obvious that he cared nothing about gardening prizes (Villa Trecci has won several), landscape strategies (many are on display), water management, or architectural flourishes.

Understandable: a cat has no interest in such things. (Neither did I before touring this park). Merlin's main concern was scooting through the shrubs and hedges and flowerbeds as dexterously as possible. He may have been looking for mice, more likely small birds or squirrels, but then again he may just have been showing off for a small group of visitors on a Saturday afternoon in October.

Fortunately we were accompanied by the park's creator, Merlin's owner, Adelmo Barlesi. The landscape architect's villa—the eponymous Villa Trecci—lies just outside the park walls. A spry 70, bald and bespectacled, Barlesi seemed every bit the proud father as he described his project with a soft Roman accent. And with good reason: since it opened in 2018, the park has been consistently cited by the Italian press as the first auto-sostenibile (self-sustainable) garden in Italy, as well as one of the most beautiful.

Despite its small size, it hosts 400 different kinds of plants and flowers and includes echoes of Roman, medieval, and Renaissance garden styles in addition to the less formal and more predominant English style. It is a member of the Mediterranean Garden Association and has been listed among the Great Gardens of Italy since July 2020.

Barlesi and Merlin met us at the front gate of the enclosed park. Dogs may enter if on leash, but the only cats officially allowed are Merlin and his siblings Leo and Otto.

We made our way across a green velvet grass carpet to one of the most beautiful settings in the park, the limonaia (lemon house). This glassed-in structure with elegant arched windows, embellished by a reflecting pool, recalls a custom of Tuscan nobility during the Renaissance. They cultivated lemon trees from India, beautiful and fragrant but unsuited to cold Tuscan winters. So the trees would be grown in terracotta basins and transferred to small purpose-built structures (wide doors, lots of glass, a warming stove) that protected them from freezing temperatures between November and March. Since we were there in October, the lemon trees were still outside and the limonaia was empty, awaiting its winter guests.



The pool of water in front of the limonaia has more than aesthetic value. In the heat of summer, its fountain adds a cooling element and provides an aesthetic framework for a bronze statue, *L'incontro* (the meeting), by a local artist, Piero Sbarluzzi. The sculpture features two horses but Merlin could have cared less.

Facing the limonaia was Merlin's preferred spot in the park — the aiola delle graminacee, an undulating flowerbed of 30,000 plants that changes character with the seasons and includes grasses and herbs as well as flowers. We followed it past the "little woods" to the rose garden, a formally enclosed "garden within the garden" containing 22 different species of rose. The bricks used for the enclosure are at least 150 years old, giving it a lived-in feel. At the same time, modern LED fixtures spotlight the vases ornamenting the entrance wall. The main entrance gate to the rose garden dates from

the 1700s; the other two gates are new but were copied from the original.

The main entrance is down a series of brick steps; the slope was designed to facilitate the collection of water through a drain at the base of the steps. That drain is evidence of the ingenuity inherent in the design of this park. As Barlesi explained to us (while Merlin was busy stalking birds), "The drains feed into 1,200 cubic meters of cisterns. Not by chance the pond holds 1,200 cubic meters of water. So when we do maintenance on the pond at the end of summer, the water goes into the cisterns, which are empty at that point. Then the water is re-directed back to the pond so the cisterns can collect rain during the wet autumn and winter. Fountains in the gardens and pumps in the cisterns ensure that the water is constantly oxygenated so it won't putrefy."

The rose garden is the only place in the park that must be watered frequently during the hot season. Every other plant, tree, and shrub was chosen for its ability to endure without irrigation during rain-challenged Tuscan summers. Barlesi made an exception for roses because roses are a universal symbol of love, and he had conceived Parco Villa Trecci as a love letter to his wife, Cinzia Sorlini. The couple purchased their home in Montepulciano in 1995, as well as the land that would become the garden. In 2014, Barlesi decided to give up his office in Rome and retire to Villa Trecci. At that point, he explains, "I had designed landscapes all over the world and decided it was time to develop something personal for Cinzia. It was my gift to her."

East of the rose garden lies the water lily pond, a manmade feature that curves naturally into its setting; its artificiality is thoroughly disguised. There is even a little rowboat tucked away in one corner; actually used for pond maintenance, we were assured.

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Barlesi chose the plants nearest the pond for their essential oils –natural mosquito repellents. He also chose fish that are known for their appetite for mosquitos. The terracotta nymph thoughtfully surveying the waterscape is again by artist Piero Sbarluzzi. This one has no name but represents Mother Nature presiding over her realm, notes Cinzia Sorlini.

North of the pond is the library garden, which continues on to become the giardino delle piante grigie (garden of grey plants). A small structure in the former area is Barlesi's study, located above the largest of the park's underground cisterns. "Grey plants," i.e., plants that require little water, are found in both areas, but the term doesn't mean these gardens are grey or bland. On the contrary, they burst with color during appropriate times of year... and with diversity year-round. Barlesi chose heat-resilient plants from the Mediterranean, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Chile, and California.



The flowers here and in the rose garden attract bees; to date there are 14 beehives in the park.

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Turning back toward the entrance, we passed the olive garden with its collection of centuries-old *Olivastra seggianese* trees. This species has fallen out of favor with local olive growers because of the difficulty of cultivation, but the trees' age and majesty convinced Barlesi not to touch them when he began his project. He worked his designs around the olive trees, incorporating them into his landscaping.

Just outside the garden walls across a country road is the Chiesina di San Bartolomeo di Caselle (the little church of St. Bartholomew of Caselle). While it is not technically inside Parco Villa Trecci, the Chiesina will round out any visitor's tour because its story of its renovation is intertwined with that of the park. Founded in 1236 on the ruins of an Etruscan site, it had been one of Montepulciano's first churches, notable for its location outside the city walls. It was named in deference to the many tanners and leather workers in the area, as St. Bartholomew (who was skinned alive) was seen as their protector.

But the Chiesina had long been abandoned when Barlesi and Sorlini acquired it in 2013. At that point it was near collapse, and extensive renovation was needed. To save it, the couple requested the protection of the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism. That happened in 2014, and from then on renovation was a protracted process of government permits followed by physical restoration. In 2017 the church was reopened as a place of worship by the Vescovo of Montepulciano. Today it is an adorable little setting for weddings and private ceremonies.

### ©Parco Villa Trecci

Barlesi's original idea for Parco Villa Trecci had been to create a garden just for his wife and himself, their three cats, and two dogs, Jack Russells Gigio and Lila. He envisioned it as a private retreat and reward after the couple's busy professional lives—he as an architect and industrial designer, and she as an art historian. The planning and execution took two full years, given that planting cannot take place in the winter and politics can take place all year round. "We had to deal with local administrators, provincial officers, and the regional government," sighs Barlesi. "With determination, we managed to overcome all these obstacles."

The end result turned out so well that the couple wound up opening the park to the public in 2018. In 2019, Parco Villa Trecci had its own artistic director because summer evenings were filled with musical mini-concerts and happenings in the most suitable settings the limonaia, the rose garden, around the pond. That didn't happen in the anomalous summer of 2020, but the couple is hopeful that these events will recommence in the years to follow.

Meanwhile, any thoughts of a peaceful retirement have gone by the wayside. The pre-COVID success of the park and its international clientele (mostly Americans in 2019) prompted the couple to invest in housing accommodations, bars, and restaurants of a certain level in and around Montepulciano. To manage these growing ventures, they created a company named after the church, San Bartolomeo di Caselle. Barlesi designs the interiors, Sorlini does research, writes books about these ventures, and fields questions from the media and the public. A garden that was conceived as a quiet retreat for two retirees has become the focal point of an enterprise employing 50 people.

But for visitors like me, Parco Villa Trecci remains an oasis of serene beauty. For Merlin too, provided no birds or squirrels cross his path.

#### **IF YOU GO:**

Entry to the gardens is €10 for adults, free for children under six when accompanied by an adult. For more information, including directions, visit the official website in Italian and English.

***[Claudia Flisi](#)** is a dual citizen writer based in Milan, Italy. Her stories have appeared in the International New York Times, Newsweek, Fortune, Variety, and many others. She has visited more than 100 countries, fallen off horses on six continents, and trained dogs in three languages. Her book about an Italian dog, [Crystal and Jade](#), was published in 2016.*

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