Renaissance Gardens of Italy

By Daniel Rosenberg

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Introduction and Overview of project

I am currently employed as a Botanical Horticulturist at the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew. I started my horticultural career later in life and following some volunteer work in historic gardens and completing my RHS level 2 Diploma, I was fortunate enough to secure a place on the Historic and Botanic Garden training scheme. I spent a year at Kensington Palace Gardens as part of the scheme. Following this I attended the Kew Specialist Certificate in Ornamental Horticulture which gave me the opportunity to deepen my plant knowledge and develop my interest in working in historic gardens.

While on the course I was able to attend a series of lectures in garden history. My interest was drawn to the renaissance gardens of Italy, which have had a significant influence on European garden design and in particular on English Gardens. It seems significant that in order to understand many of the most important historic gardens in the UK one must understand the design principles and forms, and the classical references and structures of the Italian renaissance. As part of the Specialist Certificate, we were given two weeks paid leave to gain work experience or horticulturally related travel. I wanted to use the opportunity to visit some of the most influential gardens in European design.

I wanted to compare and find out more about how gardens are conserved, restored and maintained in other parts of Europe and in particular the iconic gardens of Italy.

I hope to describe how elements such as the grotto, water features and the Bosco have been used through the gardens and how these elements changed and evolved. I hope to explore later gardens in the North in which the style evolves into the Baroque.

Renaissance gardens are often thought of as the conifers and evergreen trees that remain and the statues and water features. However, these are merely the most enduring elements and the more ephemeral planting in many has been lost in time. Some of the gardens have attempted to restore this original planting and I hope to illustrate how this changes the nature of the garden experience.

I also hope to develop an understanding of the classical references used in the gardens and how these were used.

Toward the end of the trip I was able to expand the scope of my schedule to include some botanic gardens and to travel further north to visit a botanic garden at the top of the Alps. This opportunity to see plants in a natural habitat which itself was huge, wild and dramatic, acted as a contrast to the meticulously planned gardens and carefully managed and controlled nature that I had seen.

Many of the gardens around Rome and Florence were created by a fairly small group of wealthy elite patrons around the same time. There were many personal links between the owners and designers of Villa D’Este, Villa Lante, Palazzo Farnese, Villa Aldobrindini and the Vatican gardens.

They were created at a time when the nature of the garden was changing. There had been considerable upheaval in the Western Christian world following the reformation and this had led to quite dramatic upheaval in Rome and Florence. In response the Catholic church was attempting to restore its position. From around 1550 gardens took centre stage as a demonstration of power and wealth. They were theatrical and dramatic intended to impress and inspire awe.
**Itinerary**

**Villa Adriana (Hadrian’s Villa)** Ruined remains of Roman villa complex

**Villa d’Este, Piazza Trento, Tivoli just outside Rome.**

Impressive waterworks and theatrical effects (The path of one hundred Fountains and Rometta Fountain). It is a Mannerist garden, verging on the Baroque. Visitors enter through the lowest point in the garden and as they ascend the garden the story of the family’s ancestors is told. It references Ovid’s Metamorphosis, Hercules and heroes from antiquity.

**Vatican Palace, Piazzo San Pietro, Rome.**

The Vatican has a central place in the history of garden design. Rebuilt in the sixteenth century as a renaissance castle garden. There is the Belvedere Court which is a fortified garden (1505), the Villa Pia (1560), the Piazza of St. Peter (1656) and the nineteenth century garden. I will need to arrange to see the Villa Pia and visit the Vatican to get access to the Belvedere Court. The Belvedere Court “dictated the basis of European garden design for more than two centuries to come”

**Villa Aldobrandini, Frascati South of Rome.**

Important early Baroque style begun in 1598. The palace is the centrepiece of the garden. There is a water theatre, and an avenue with a central cascade. Other features include the Pillars of Hercules.

**Pallazzo Farnese, Caprarola, near viterbo, North of Rome.**

A pentagonal villa-fortress, with two quadrilateral parterres and a casino in the woods. Designed by Vignola. It includes a water staircase, fountains, terraces, a casino and loggia.

**Villa Lante, Bagnaia, near Viterbo North of Rome.**

An example of the Mannerist phase of the Italian renaissance. Designed for Cardinal Gambara. It uses Palladian circle and square. The geometry was inspired by the Belvedere at the Vatican. The garden is a symbolic representation of humanity’s descent from the Golden Age, based on Ovid’s metamorphosis.

**Villa Medici at Castello (Villa Reale), Castello just north of Florence.**

Designed by sculptor, Niccolo Tribolo. A grotto, terraces and central axis. It references Ovid’s metamorphosis. It is surrounded by high walls.

**Villa della Petraia**

Designed by Raffaello Pagni for Ferdinando Medici. Laid out over three terraces later adapted to the French style.

**Boboli gardens in Florence.** This was the Medici’s Florentine villa with a garden dating to 1549. Designed by Tribolo (who also designed villa Castello—also to be visited). The garden was developed over time. It has a grotto designed by Buontalenti, Venus by Giambologna and four slaves by Michaelangelo.

**Giardino Bardini** is very near, and included on the same ticket. This garden is 4 hectares of parkland. It is in baroque style.
**Botanical Gardens Florence.** This is a renaissance garden in its own right, being founded in 1545.

**Isola Bella** A Baroque seventeenth century theatrical ten-terraced garden. Begun in 1632 by Count Borromeo and designed by Fontana and Castelli.

**Isola Madre** The Giardini Botanici del’Isola Madre (Botanic Garden) are a seven-terrace garden designed by Count Borromeo in the late eighteenth century in the grounds of the family renaissance villa and previously the site of a citrus orchard.

**Botanic Alpine Garden Schynige Platte (Switzerland)** Alpine botanic garden

**Botanic Gardens of Villa Taranto** Established by a Scottish captain in 1931. Intended to be set out in an English style.
Villa Adriana (Hadrian’s villa), Tivoli

Hadrian’s villa lies at the bottom of the Tivoli hill with the town of Tivoli above. The UNESCO world heritage site is made up of the remains of a large complex of buildings and architectural structures forming an extensive palace with a wide footprint. The palace was built by the Emperor Hadrian after he came to power in AD 117. Although none of the original planting or gardens survive what remains are the hard landscape features dating back to Roman times.

The significance of the remains lies in the fact that they were rediscovered by renaissance artists and inspired a nostalgic interest in all things from antiquity. Elements from Hadrian’s villa were taken up and recreated in Renaissance gardens throughout Italy.

Prior to the fifteenth century the classical world had largely been forgotten. The church frowned on the study of pagan religions or gods and it was not until the renaissance that architects and designers began to look back to Greek and Roman texts to inform their work. It was only toward the end of the renaissance that these ideas influenced garden design.

Artists such as Michelangelo and Leonardo came to study Hadrian’s Villa. Ligorio who later designed Villa D’Este a short distance up the hill from Tivoli and the Vatican gardens actually surveyed and excavated parts of the villa (Don, 2011, p50).

Plan view of Villa Adriana


One of the most important parts of the remains for gardeners is the Canopus. This is long pool surrounded with columns and statues. At one end of the pool is an exedra which was a domed semi-
circular, conerved area which would have had a long stone bench on which guests would have reclinèd while they ate, drank and celebrated. Hadrain would have sat on a raised platform behind them.

It is thought that the canal referred back to the Egyptian town of Canopus. The Serapeum is based on the temple of Serapis (Don, 2011, 51).

The number of pools, waterfalls and running water relied on a complex network of aqueducts and pumps. Water would have poured down in a sheet from the roof of the exedra in front of the guests.
The exedra at the far end of the canal

Originally the canal would have been surrounded by columns and caryatids (the sculpted female figures that acted as supports). These were copies of Greek statues.

The Maritime theatre. A circular pond surrounded by Ionic columns. In the centre is a small island upon which stands a Domus (miniature palace). Circular courtyards were unheard of in fifteenth century architecture and this proved a great source of information for renaissance architects.

There were very few examples of classical architecture or records remaining and so Villa Adriana had a disproportionate influence on renaissance designers.
Villa D’Este, Tivoli

Villa D’Este (which was in fact a monastery at the time rather than a villa) is one of the best examples of a renaissance garden at its height. It was built for Cardinal Ippolito D’Este in the middle of the 16th century. The power and wealth in Italy at this time lay with the church and D’Este aspired to be pope. He appointed Ligorio to build the garden and he not only took ideas from Villa Adriana but also actual artefacts.

Painting inside the villa of how the original gardens looked.

View from the top tier of the gardens, looking down over the rest of the garden.
Originally visitors entered the garden from a gate at the very bottom looking up to the villa with the gardens stretching out before them. This would have given one a very different experience as now the garden is entered from above and one descends down into it from the villa. When I reached the bottom, I retraced my steps as if entering the garden as a visitor in the 16th century. Many of the Villas and gardens I visited including Villa Aldobrandini, Palazzo Farnese and Villa Lante sit on top of a hill, dominating the town below and have to be approached from a very humbling and awe inspiring low level.

As it is one reaches a flat terrace level (The Vialone) stretching across the width of the garden. One gets glimpses of jets of water, paths and fountains below which entices one in. On the afternoon I visited it was open to the local community free of charge which I found a wonderful way of making it accessible and integrating it into the local life. I could hear giggles and loud squeals of delight as children played with the water features, which I imagined conveyed the delight and excitement they were intended to elicit.

The tone of the garden is set by a small, slightly concealed water fountain (Grotto of Pomona) which originally would have been encountered near the final approach to the villa. It is a small fountain which is playful and surprising. There are two small jet of water on either side. If one blocks one side the jet on the other side shoots up and hits the other curious person in the face as they peer down.
Villa D’Este, The Vialone, the top terrace

From the top of the garden one can also enjoy the borrowed views of the landscape of the surrounding hills.
The garden is designed as a series of terraces which climb (or descend, depending where one enters) a fairly steep slope and open out to a wider level at the bottom. There are diagonal paths, flights of stairs and crossing paths. The garden stretches out before you as a large maze, with different routes and choices to make at every stage. I imagine there are an infinite variety of ways one can explore the garden, each with a very different impact. The delicate sounds of splashing water draws you on.
Maze like paths
The most awe inspiring and delightful feature, not only in this garden but throughout my whole trip was the line of The Hundred Fountains. It is simple and understated but the cumulative effect of the repetition and number is overwhelming.

The Hundred Fountains
The Hundred Fountains, close up and from the front.

The Oval Fountain

I loved the fact that it is possible to go under the fountains and around them. It felt like being allowed a glimpse behind the magician’s curtain.
Fountains squirting water into the balustrades

Rometta Fountain, a miniature of ancient Rome

Central staircase
Fountain of the Dragons

Fountain of the Dragons from below

The Fishponds

The Fish Ponds as seen from above and behind The Organ Fountain.

The three ponds were originally fish ponds and would have been a necessity to provide fresh fish for the monastery. But the Organ Fountain that stands at one end of them is purely there to create an impact and was very characteristic of the Water jokes that many of the gardens created.
The Organ Fountain

The fountain of the organ plays music to accompany the water spectacle. It is an amazing piece of engineering as the notes it plays are created by the water as it forces itself through the pipes. What is equally impressive is the fact that there are no pumps moving the water along, it is powered just by the gravity of the water from a diverted river, brought to the garden by miles of aqueduct.

Clearly this was intended as one of the centrepieces of the garden. Perhaps due to my modern sensibilities, I felt more moved by the less grand fountains. I loved the smaller details such as the balustrades which had small streams of water running through them, so that one could draw their hand though crystal clear, cool water as one descended the stair case. I saw this idea echoed at Villa Lante.

Water streaming down the centre of the balustrades
The lower level garden

The original entrance to the garden at the bottom of a steep slope

The Statue of Diana of Ephesus

Diana of Ephesus was a goddess of fertility from pre-Hellenic times. She originally formed part of the Fountain of the Organ but was later moved to the lower part of the garden.
Vatican City, Rome

There are references to a garden at the Vatican that date back to the 13th Century. It was the construction of the Villa Belvedere in 1485 that had the greatest impact on the development of the garden. The villa stood opposite the Vatican and was used as a retreat by the Pope.

In 1504 Bramante was commissioned with designing something that would link the Vatican to the villa. The design Bramante came up with was to enclose the space between the two by extending the palace at each side toward the villa. The enclosed space became known as the cortile del Belvedere.

Cortile del Belvedere, 1506

(https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Bramante-Cortile-del-Belvedere-Vaticano-1506_fig1_28227920)

To visit the Vatican Gardens one has to be part of an organised tour. Much of what was gardens has now been built upon. The gardens were designed to house sculptures and fountains that the Vatican collected and which now mostly form part of the collection inside.

The 1st Century Roman bronze ‘Pigna’ (Pinecone) in front of the exedra was an ancient fountain.
There is an exedra similar to the one seen at Villa Adriana which was a feature that was common in ancient Roman architecture and which Ligorio (who continued the work of Bramante) would have known well from Villa Adriana. The exedra in turn drew on the ancient Greek use of a room ringed with stone benches where one could relax and talk.

Although the courtyard has been much changed and the original features no longer survive, it was immensely influential and became a model for Italian gardens that followed.

**View of the dome of the Vatican from the garden**

One of the last remaining renaissance parts of the garden is located around the Villa Pia which was built in the 1560’s by Ligorio for Pope Pius IV. It was intended as a casino surrounded by a bosco. The façade is based on classical ideas and is decorated with mythological scenes and mosaics. In front there is a fishpond which is now populated by turtles.

**The Villa Pia, designed by Ligoria in 1560’s. From the rear (left) and front (right)**
Fontana dell’ Aquilone (great eagle)

Detail from the Fontana dell’Aquilone

The giardino all’ italiana. This replaced the Square Garden
A lot of the gardens are laid out in an English landscape style.

These Greek theatrical masks on display in the Vatican museum reminded me of the huge stone statues found in the bosco at Villa Aldobrandini and to be found at Bomarzo
The Octagonal Courtyard at the Vatican Museum

I have to confess that although the Vatican site is immensely impressive in many ways, the gardens did not stand out. It is a shame that the elements that made it so important in setting the foundations of garden design have now largely disappeared. It was a shame that the tour guide that took our group around the gardens did not know much about plants or garden history and was perhaps understandably more focused on touristic themes. Nevertheless, visiting the Vatican left a huge impression and one is very aware that they are in a place of huge significance.
Villa Aldobrandini

Plan of the gardens at Aldobrindini

(http://www.artandarchitecture.org.uk/images/full/ac1e8e1654035e7a7664b4c31fbb6b1f886ba05e.html)

The two columns as seen in 1675 with jets of water from the top
(Ramsey & Atlee, 1989, p.137)

One of the difficulties of planning the trip was that many of the sites have very few contact details or organisation. Many are in private hands and there is no equivalent to the National Trust or English Heritage in Italy. I tried to contact gardens directly but received no responses. The culture around gardening seems to be very different to that of the UK. I got the impression that head gardener roles do not have the importance or prestige they have here and gardening as a career is not a highly regarded profession.

At villa Aldobrindini there was no sign of how to reach the garden or if indeed it was open to the public. I had seen some anecdotal accounts on online chatrooms which described walking around to a side entrance. The main gates which are located in town were chained shut. The villa sits at the top of a hill which dominates the town below. The long avenue of trees which leads directly up the hill
stretches from the gates up to the impressive villa. There was a distinct air of neglect and fading grandeur which was very evocative of the Dickens characterisation of Mrs Haversham’s house.

The gates had no signs, information or directions attached. I decided to follow the estate walls around to see if I could find a way in. The road immediately begins to climb as it curls around the hill of the estate. The pavement also quickly disappears. After a considerable climb and after having thought several times that there was clearly no way in, I found a small entrance, where the gates were ajar and which led to the side of the front steps of the villa. There was a sign on the gate saying no entrance. I did enter and tried to find someone. The entire villa seemed deserted but after some time exploring the front terrace, I saw a car pull up. I approached and tried to explain why I had come and if I could look around. The ladies appeared to be office staff and they said I should feel free to look around.

The villa was started by Giacomo della Porta and after his death in 1602 it was completed by Carlo Maderno. The cardinal built 8 miles of aqueduct and canals to bring water to the villa to power the great water work centrepiece of the garden. The waterworks were designed by Orazio Olivieri who had also been involved with the fountains at Villa D’Este.

The Musical Water Theatre was intended to be seen from a Loggia on the fourth floor of the villa. The central figure is a globe held up by The Atlas Organ. When it was operational this would have played music as the water produced a display. It was a shame that none of the water features were in operation, save from a small trickle falling on the globe. After seeing Villa D’Este I had a real sense of how water brings the garden to life.

The only part of the garden that was green and had plants seemed to reflect modern tastes. The colour came from hydrangea shrubs.

What struck me was the grandeur of the gardens. In relation to the size of the villa, the gardens seemed huge and grand enough to grace a much larger palace.

I found a route around the back of the Water Theatre into what was once the Bosco. At higher levels I crossed the path of the water as it would have descended to the Musical Water Theatre below. The garden was bombed during the war and so now much of the wider garden remains in ruins.

Villa Aldobrindini as seen from the town (Frascati) below
The avenue of holm oaks as seen from the gates at the foot of the hill

The gnarled avenue of Holm oaks that lead up from the base of the hill, seen from above

The villa as seen from the terrace to the front
The musical water theatre

The higher tier of the Musical Theatre with partially concealed columns

Globe held aloft by Atlas was an organ that in its time would have played music
View toward the parterre

Hydrangeas in flower brought the only colour to the garden.

Remaining parterre to the left of the villa
A mask in the bosco which reminded me of ancient roman and Greek theatrical masks

The upper tier of the Musical Theatre as seen from above in the woods. Originally these two columns would have sprayed jets of water from the top which would then have run down the channels that spiral down the side

The remains of higher tiers of the Musical Theatre in the woods. Unfortunately, it seems the site was heavily bombed during the war and much of the original site remains unrestored
The remains of another higher level of the Musical Theatre called the Fountain of the Shepherds. This was a much more rustic style fitting the more rural bosco.

View from the front of the Villa toward Rome in the distance, which would have been the centre of papal power which would have been so important.

One of the most delightful aspects of my visit, as can be seen in the photos, is that I was able to enjoy the gardens entirely alone. This added an extra dimension of wonder and magic.
Palazzo Farnese

The palace is remarkably striking as it sits at the top of the hill, at the top of the main road which runs straight down through the centre of town. It stands over the town and dominates it. The palace looks more like a military fortification than a palace. The angular, geometric shape reminded me of medieval English castles.

In 1556 Giacomo Vignola was given the task of developing the garden. He had worked on the Vatican with Ligorio who had also worked on the Villa D’Este.

View of the front of the Palace

View from the terrace of the palace dominating the town below

One enters the gardens via a drawbridge across a moat. The initial part of the garden was not that unusual or impressive. There are two gardens, divided into a summer garden facing northwest and a winter garden facing southwest. One first emerges into the winter garden which is divided into four squares lined with box with a grotto at the far end. Although originally the squares would have been filled with citrus trees and flowers, they have been restored in the early twentieth century with grass in the mistaken belief that this was historically accurate. The summer garden was closed at the time of my visit.
Crossing the drawbridge into the winter garden with the grotto laying at the end

The grotto in the winter garden

One then climbs a flight of stairs and enters the bosco. There is a path that leads up through fir trees. As one turns a bend in the path a huge Casino (garden pavilion) with a large fountain emerges from the trees. For me this is the real joy of the garden. The mood and feel changes so dramatically from the somberness of the Palazzo to the fantastical soft focus of the bosco. The entire Casino section is a real surprise and has the dream like feel of Shakespeare’s The Tempest.

Entering the bosco
Two flights of stairs lead up to a huge vase flanked by tritons. The water would have cascaded down a water staircase which is formed from serpentine shaped dolphins.

The water staircase from below and above

The Vase and water tritons fountain
The staircase leading up from the fountain to the parterres. The unicorns are symbols of the Farnese family and would have spouted water into a shell held up by kneeling tritons.

As one reaches the top of the stairs one finds the Casino building surrounded by parterres formed with box.

Casino and box parterres

The parterre is surrounded with a low wall with a series of caryatids. Each one has a vase on their head and some hold animals. The contrast between the formality and order of the parterres and the ‘wildness’ of the rural bosco beyond the wall gives one the sense that the statues are holding back the chaos pushing in at the border to create the idyllic, balanced and peaceful order within.
Order versus chaos: parterre and bosco separated by the wall and caryatids

The terrace beyond the Casino. Standing at the opening into the forest and looking back toward the back of the Casino
Villa Lante

Plan and side elevation of the gardens at Villa Lante

(https://courses.umass.edu/latour/Italy/2005/JDavis/index.html)

View from the garden with the town (Bagnaia) beneath

Looking up the main road to Villa Lante that sits above the town
It is believed that Vignola who worked on Palazzo Farnese, also designed the gardens at Villa Lante. Cardinal Gambara who owned villa Lante was related by marriage to the Farnese family. He was also a close friend of Cardinal D’Este who built the garden at villa D’Este.

The Fountain of Pegassus at the entrance to the garden. Pegassus is a symbol of demons conquered to release art, passion and hope. (Don, 2011, p.88)

There are two ways in to the garden. One leads into the lowest part of the garden and the other into the park around the garden. This reflects the dual role of a private garden and a wider public part typical of many renaissance estates.

Ramsey and Atlee argue that the garden’s narrative can be understood to be man’s ascent from the Golden Age to the age of civilisation as told in Ovid’s Metamorphosis. (Ramsey & Atlee, 1989, p. 154) The park around the garden represents the Golden Age which was wild nature, free but primitive. Then came the Flood, represented by water flowing from the park to the Fountain of the Deluge. The water then runs down through the garden under the control of a crayfish which is a symbol and play on the name Gambara. The formal gardens at the lowest level of the garden represent the synthesis of nature and art which was the renaissance ideal (Ramsey & Atlee, 1989, p.154).

The garden would have been entered from the top after having made one’s way up through the wildness of the park. I had to start at the bottom and work my way up.

The parterres of the bottom level are a seventeenth century replacement. There is a fountain at the centre which all combine to create a strong sense of order and harmony.
The Fountain of the Moors at the centre of the lower parterres

Looking up the garden from the centre of the lowest level

Detail of the Fountain
Looking up the garden from the lowest point

The highlight of the garden for me was the eighteen-metre-long stone table that sits on the second tier of the garden. It has a rill that runs down the centre into which diners could have cooled their wine as they dined, looking over the town below. There is also a channel that runs along the base of the table in which one could dangle one’s foot.
Above the table is the Fountain of the Giants. They represent Tiber and Arno and are symbolic of the fertility that water brings to the land. Unfortunately, when I visited the fountain was covered and closed for restoration.

As one ascends one comes to the Fountain of the Water Chain. This is an impressive raised channel that flows down the centre of the staircase, causing to the water to whirl and froth as it makes it’s way down. The Crayfish, emblem of the Gambara family controls this unruly natural force through the channel.

The Fountain of the Water Chain

The Gambara emblem which pours out and controls the water

Fountain of the Dolphins
Fountain of the Flood

The large Grotto at the top of the garden is known as the Fountain of the Flood. When the water is turned on, if one approaches the grotto to investigate closer one is sprayed from several small spouts built into the walls of the temple. At this end of the garden the water is uncontrolled and unpredictable, fitting with the idea of untamed nature and in contrast to the later (earlier if walking up the garden from below) control of water in Chain of Water. This is also symbolic of the Deluge which were the rains that washed away the sins of mankind, but are at the same time a playful trick that was typically popular at the time.
Villa Castello, Florence

The two villas on the outskirts of Florence were built by the Medici family who dominated the area. There is a different feel in the Florentine gardens to those in the environs of Rome. Perhaps this is in part due to the fact that they were not part of the same fairly close circle in Rome.

Cosimo Medici commissioned Niccolo Tribolo to replace the gardens at Castello in 1538. He also employed him the following year to design the Boboli gardens in town.

The garden is surrounded by high walls as it would have originally been. Many features were lost in the eighteenth century. Two oblong fishponds would have been laid out in front of the villa, which would have been used for games. These were filled in and are now a carpark. There would have also been two secret gardens on either side of the villa which would have been filled with ‘strange herbs’ (Ramsey & Atlee, 1989, p. 81)

It seems that there are fairly good records of the original planting and there has been a concerted effort to recreate the planting and to restore the garden to its original state. The most striking thing when one enters the garden is the colour and life added by the planting. I was struck by the hum of insects buzzing between flowers. There is also a beautiful scent in the air as citrus trees bake in the summer sun and aromatic flowers exude their perfume.

Vasari, a contemporary who visited the garden describes the pomegranates and bitter orange trees that grew against the wall and the olive and orange trees that ran along the paths. (Ramsey & Atlee, 1989, p. 81)

The Lemon Garden sits just above the parterres. It was very popular at the time to cultivate citrus fruits trees and there are around 600 varieties at Castello
Colourful and scented planting in the parterres

View up to the retaining wall which houses the grotto

The garden has fountains, but these do not compare to the elaborate water theatre I had seen in the Roman gardens. Here the water features were much more subdued. There is a Grotto at Castello but it was closed for restoration work when I visited. The Grotto Degli Animali by Tribolo sits in the retaining wall built to separate the high level of the garden.
View of the fountain topped with the bronze figure of Hercules struggling with the giant Antaeus at the centre of the parterres

The bosco sits on the higher level of garden.

The fountain here has the figure of Appenino shivering on top of a small island in the middle of a pond.
Villa della Petraia

A short ten-minute walk from Castello is Petraia which is another Medici garden. In 1589 Cosimo’s son Ferdinando inherited the site at Petraia and commissioned Buontalenti to build a villa and garden there.

Records show that the garden has been significantly changed since it was built, and in particular the lowest of the three terraces. There is evidence that it was redesigned as early as the start of the seventeenth century in order to resemble the French style.

View of the villa from the bottom of the garden parterres

The geometric parterre

As with Castello the parterres have been planted with a variety of colourful and aromatic flowers
The Lemon Garden with beautiful views toward Florence
The bosco
Boboli Gardens

The Boboli gardens stand out from the other gardens in terms of scale and grandeur and have the feel of a mighty palace. They stand in stark contrast to the other Medici gardens I had just visited. Castello and Patraia felt more intimate and domestic.

Work on Boboli was started in 1549 by Cosimo to create gardens for the Pitti Palace. It remains largely unchanged. They have always been a public garden rather than for private enjoyment and their primary function was to demonstrate Medici wealth and power. Indeed, everything here feels that it has been built to heroic and expansive proportions.

Front façade of the Pitti Palace

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the sunken garden and amphitheatre would be used for grand performances. The sunken Garden was flooded and spectacles of galleons re-enacting famous nautical battles were played out.

View of the Palace, the amphitheatre and the Sunken Garden
View over Florence and in the foreground the Fountain of Neptune stands in what was a fishpond.

Viale dei Cipressi, a large avenue leading down to a large pool and Island of Lemon trees known as the ‘Isolotto’.

Smaller side paths leading off the main avenue.
The ‘Isolotto’ with display of lemon trees

The Bardini Garden and view out toward the Florentine Suburbs
Botanic Gardens, Florence

The botanic garden in Florence is a renaissance garden in its own right. It was built by Cosimo and designed by Tribolo. Built in 1545 it is the third oldest botanic garden in the world. Initially it was known as the ‘Giardini dei Semplici’ as it was originally intended to grow medicinal plants. Some of the trees date back to 1720 such as the *Taxus baccata*.

Front façade of the Botanic Gardens

Orangery

The site is divided up into smaller and larger avenues
Isola Bella

After the simple, elegant beauty and refinement of the renaissance gardens of Rome and Florence, nothing prepared me for the ostentatious, loud and flamboyant exuberance of the Isola Bella. On all levels it was a huge shock to arrive at Lake Maggiore. Up until this point I had often enjoyed the luxury of being entirely alone in the gardens I visited, save for the Vatican or the Boboli gardens. The gardens around the lake were all very busy and full of visitors and I felt a mild indignation that my peace had been shattered. The experience of shuffling through a garden surrounded by people and with views obscured by groups posing for photos burst the bubble I had been in up to this point.

I think my palate and visual frame of reference had become used to the muted tones and silvery green Mediterranean colours of the south. The sudden explosion of vivid colours and big, elaborate constructions also felt a bit overwhelming and claustrophobic.

Having said that the gardens were awe inspiring in a very different way. One reaches the garden by a ferry to the island which adds a level of drama. Viewed from one of the many ferry buses the garden
seems to float on the lake like a huge, ornate wedding cake. Once in the garden every corner had a view which felt like a perfect photo or postcard. The statues seemed to soar above you against a dramatic backdrop. They seemed to float.

It is magical to arrive by boat and indeed to island hop on the local ferries which run as a bus service. The blue water of the lake on the short journey between the islands serves as a visual palate cleanser between the different gardens.

Isola Bella is one of the three Borromean islands in Lake Maggiore. The garden and palace were started in 1631 and took 40 years to develop, mainly under the direction of Carlo Fontana and Francesco Castelli.

Once in the palace, the gardens are reached by descending into six subterranean grottos. The walls are decorated with shells and pebbles. One snatches glimpses of what is to come through windows.

Subterranean grottos

Views out toward the garden

One emerges out into the Courtyard of Diana which two staircases that lead up into the garden.

The Courtyard of Diana
Nothing prepares you for what is arguably the centrepiece of the garden at the top of the stairs. The stairs open out onto a wide terrace, laid out with two parterres, but one’s view is dominated by the central Water Theatre which overshadows everything.

The Water Theatre

This is a huge façade which has niches set into it housing statues of gods, goddesses and enormous scallops. At each side and from behind there are columns and spires that soar up, upon which figures seems to float above you.

Statues soar above you

To add to the surreal, fantastic majesty of the garden magnificent white peacocks wander about freely.
There are ten terraces which are layered up like a pyramid
Each narrow terrace has one plant that predominates. These include hydrangeas, oleanders, and roses.

Looking down over the terraces to the parterres on the south side of the island

The eastern parterre
The southern parterre

The glasshouse
Isola Madre

Isola Madre as seen on approach from the sea

Isola Madre is much subtler and more understated than Isola Bella. It was the first of the islands to be inhabited and perhaps retains more of the renaissance sensibilities. Perhaps also due to the fact it is now a botanic garden means that it is less interested in elaborate display than Isola Bella.

The walls along the entrance

The palace on the island was built in the sixteenth century in the renaissance style by Count Lancillotto Borromeo. The garden started life as an orchard, then an olive grove and then became a citrus grove. It finally became a botanic garden. There are seven terraced gardens created in the English style in the late eighteenth century.
This rare Kashmir cypress (Cupressus cashmeriana ‘Glauca’), planted in 1862 is the largest in Europe. It was uprooted by a tornado in 2006 but has been restored to its original location and supported by a variety of cables.
The chapel square has a waterlily pond

Avenue of the Palms which runs alongside the palace. The side of the building is covered with *Bougenvillia glabra* ‘Cypheri’

Huge lotus flowers are plentiful
Botanic Alpine Gardens, Schynige Platte (Switzerland)

I was able to visit the gardens of Lake Maggiore in a much shorter time than I had planned and as a result I began to investigate how I could best use the time I had left in Italy. As I work in a Botanic garden it felt appropriate to visit some local botanic gardens. The lake area has a particular microclimate due to its location and so they can grow an interesting range of plants.

I also realised how close to the border I was staying. I discovered that a very interesting Alpine Botanic garden, the Schynige Platte was just over the border in the Jungfrau region of Switzerland. It seemed like too good an opportunity to miss and so I e-mailed the head gardener, Jasmin Senn to see if I could visit. She replied immediately and the team were very welcoming and accommodating. I was shown around the site by one of the team called Larissa.

Unfortunately, my camera battery died and so I have very few photos of the visit.

Views from the alpine rack railway climbing up to the garden

The botanic garden was established in 1927 to study and display as many Swiss Alpine plants as possible in their natural communities. The garden has approximately 700 plant species. It is 2000 metres above sea level and in winter it is covered in snow. The garden is then closed and the team leave until the snow melts in May.

Individual plant species are not grown in isolation but in plant communities as they would in nature, either in Alpine meadows or on steep slopes of wild hay.

The gardeners follow the old tradition of harvesting wild hay in late summer on the slopes too steep to be grazed by cattle, using scythes. This prevents shrubs and trees below the tree line becoming invasive.

The site is limestone rock and calcareous soil and was naturally rich in plant varieties that grow in Alpine meadows. The team created a small moorland and a rocky area to accommodate swiss plants from silicate mountains.

Larissa explained that they are concerned that as a result of climate change they have noted that the tree line is slowly creeping upwards.
Travelling to the alps felt such a huge shift in perspective. After spending so long visiting such structured and controlled gardens it felt quite awe inspiring to be surrounded by such huge, wild nature.
Villa Tarranto Botanic Gardens

In 1930 a Scottish captain called McEacharn created a botanic garden in an English style garden. He created terraced gardens and flowerbeds designed according strict geometry and symmetry similar to Italian gardens along the banks of Lake Maggiore.

Villa Tarranto as seen from the water

The Nelumbian ponds
Nelumbo nucifera

Entrance boulevard

The Terraced gardens
Valletta is an artificially created valley below the villa spanned by an arch stone bridge.

**Conclusion and Future Plans**

My journey through Italy felt very much like I was following the narrative of an unfolding story. I feel very lucky to have had the chance to be immersed in such a rich cultural world filled with beauty and creativity, and these gardens will stay with me always. I believe only seeing them in the flesh does them justice and only by walking through them and experiencing them with all the senses can one really appreciate their impact. The Florentine gardens full of colour, scent and movement really left an impression. At Villa D’Este the beauty almost brought me to tears.

I would be interested continuing this narrative history in the future, perhaps by visiting the gardens of France where the next era of garden design took over from the renaissance.

I would also like to travel in the UK to see how the renaissance ideas have been used and reinvented in our own landscape and using our own plants.
Final Budget Breakdown:

**Flights:** £395

**Travel within Italy and Switzerland:** I had planned to Hire a car, but in the event, I had to rely on Trains, bus, Metro, taxi and Swiss rail £185

**Accommodation:**
- Rome: £211
- Stressa: £258
- Viterbo: £200
- Florence: £230

**Food and Drink:** £450

**Garden Entry and sundries** £103

**Grand Total** £2,032

This trip would not have been possible without the kind support of these financial awards. As a father of two on a very low wage at the time I would not have been able to find the resources to travel away from home for two weeks. Unfortunately, the cost of many things was higher than initially anticipated as I had to travel at the height of the summer season and as I was only able to concretely book flights and accommodation near the time, the prices had often rocketed.

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