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A Garden on a Mountain on an Island in the Sea

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This Issue



Santa Caterina from above. Author's photographs, except as noted



The genuinely modern does not chase after the new; it makes the old new again.

Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead*



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If stones had tongues, the din on Monte Serra, at the eastern end of the island of Elba, would be unbearable. So much human activity has come and gone over the years; surely the stones must have a lot to say. Fortunately, humans have tongues. And pens, and keyboards. Otherwise the eons of history leading up to a small but important botanical garden, the Orto dei Semplici Elbano, devoted to the rich flora of the Tuscan Archipelago, would go untold.

It would be hard for us to understand the island's first human inhabitants, the Neanderthals (*Homo neanderthalensis*), who arrived on Elba over 50,000 years ago, when it was still connected to the mainland during the last ice age. Certainly, they were drawn to the island's dense forests of evergreen oak (*Quercus ilex*), and abundant game. Though they left no words, they left evidence of the first man-made fires on the island. Not until the Neolithic era, about 20,000 years ago, did small populations of humans (*Homo sapiens sapiens*) begin to settle the island, felling the forests with stone axes to build shelters, to clear land for raising livestock and growing crops, and to make fires. They became, eventually, the first miners of the island around 7,000 BC, smelting copper for creating bronze tools and vessels. By the ninth century BC, the Etruscans began what was to become a long history of iron mining on the eastern end of the island. The iron from these mines traveled as far east as Persia, making the island both famous and coveted. The Greeks called the island *Aethalia*, meaning "fumes," because of constant smoke from the smelters, fueled with oak wood. The mining continued through many civilizations, wars, plagues, and acts of piracy until the 1980s, leaving a remarkably altered, yet beautiful landscape of what botanists call degraded ecosystems.

These ecosystems, known as garrigue or maquis, include many familiar aromatic plants, such as rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*), Spanish lavender (*Lavandula stoechas*), rock rose (*Cistus* spp.) and curry plant (*Helichrysum italicum*). It's hard to think of these plant communities, so evocative of the joyous

today.

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Italian lifestyle, as something “degraded.” We joyfully mimic them when creating Mediterranean gardens here on the West Coast of North America, unaware of their natural context.



Rosa 'Cardinal de Richelieu' on the walls of Santa Caterina.
Photograph by Lorry Eason

In spite of all this disturbance, there are 1,568 species of native and naturalized plants in the Tuscan Archipelago. Of these, 1,209 can be found on Elba, the largest of the chain's seven islands and the third largest island in Italy. Among them are two of our West Coast natives: Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*), planted in the forties and fifties as part of a reforestation project and now naturalizing; and deer fern (*Blechnum spicant*), a member of the circumboreal flora still in evidence in the Mediterranean Basin.



Foliage of *Centaurea gymnocarpa*, an endemic species on the island of Elba

At 83.5 square miles, this small island's incredibly diverse and rightfully famous geology supports a variety of plants. From the sandy beaches that draw millions of tourists each year, to the 3,363-foot Mount Capanne, the "roof" of the archipelago, there is a wide range of habitats. Remnant populations of yew (*Taxus baccata*) and holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) grow in remote mountain valleys and on bluffs. In the fertile plains of the central island can be seen the typical Tuscan fields lined with Italian cypress (*Cupressus sempervirens*) and eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus globulus*), quilted in spring with ephemeral poppies (*Papaver dubium* and *P. rhoeas*). On the rocky slopes, maquis

forests of Italian buckthorn (*Rhamnus alaternus*), laurustinus (*Viburnum tinus*), and tree heather (*Erica arborea*) create impenetrable thickets. This diverse and everblooming flora inspired the naturalist Gianfranco Barsotti to call Elba “*l’isola dell’eterna primavera*,” the island of eternal spring.



The entrance to the Orto dei Semplici Elbano at Santa Caterina

A Forgotten Monastery

This garden island, which has intrigued artists, botanists, and writers for centuries, also captivated a relative newcomer, Hans George Berger, photographer and writer. He moved to the island in the 1970s, setting up residence in Rio nell’Elba. From

the village, he could see the medieval monastery of Santa Caterina resting sphinx-like on the flanks of Monte Serra. Still a consecrated church, the Eremita di Santa Caterina, situated where a late thirteenth century monk had a vision of the Egyptian saint, sat abandoned since 1850. When Berger, who claims to have been “in a romantic phase,” visited the hermitage for the first time in 1977, the gothic beauty of the ruins captivated him. He acquired the keys to the property from the village priest, took over custodianship, and began minor renovations. It became his private retreat. He wrote there and hosted his French colleagues, the writer Hervé Guibert, who wrote most of his novels there, and the philosopher Michel Foucault. His goal of creating a proper retreat space for artists and researchers did not take shape until years later.

In 1988, Berger was given a sixty-year lease from the Catholic Church. With the help of many friends and Riesi, the inhabitants of Rio nell’Elba, renovations began in earnest. Berger and friends excavated the terraces and restacked the old stone walls of the Hortus Conclusus, the enclosed garden of the monastery where monks once grew vegetables and the figs they dried and sold on the saint’s feast day. To this day, Riesi call the place “*l’eremo dei fichi secchi*,” the hermitage of the dried figs.

With the hermitage more functional, Berger faced the challenge of his first garden. Like most first-time gardeners, he worked from memory. His grandmother’s garden was in the Mosel Valley of Germany; there, as a boy of five, he hid in the fragrant petals of a ‘New Dawn’ rose that grew up the side of her house. Stirred by these memories, Berger imagined a rose garden at Santa Caterina using the old German hybrids of rosarian Peter Lambert, father of the hybrid musk rose. Hans drove to the world famous rosarium in Sangerhausen, Germany, and brought back a trunk-load of Lambert’s roses.



Modern walls of ancient stone define several of the “rooms,” including il Labirinto, where medicinal plants are grown

A Garden to Match

Under Berger’s care, the sensuous roses thrived. Though beautiful, they seemed out of place to him in this arid, hermetic environment. He wanted to revive the monastic tradition of growing medicinal herbs and vegetables. About this time, he met botanists Fabio Gabari and Gabriella Corsi, both University of Pisa professors who had been studying the island’s flora. Berger, always one to solve problems by finding the experts, saw in Gabari and Corsi the future of the garden at Santa Caterina, possibly even as a public garden. Corsi’s field of interest was the medicinal and

edible wild plants, while Gabari was intrigued by endemism, of which Elba offered some good examples. As they walked to the monastery through the maquis in 1991, Corsi collected herbs for a salad. Over their meal of salad, bread, and wine at the hermitage, the founding ideas were born for the Orto dei Semplici Elbano, The Garden of Elban Simples, based upon Medieval herb gardens.

By 1995, Berger had implored Gabbetti and Isola, a team of architects from Turin, to create a plan for the nascent garden. Working in the Medieval idiom, they created a modern design that blends beautifully with the older structures and the rugged landscape in which it sits. Construction began in 1996. Stones lying silent and useless for centuries were once again employed to create a stunning hardscape. Native evergreen oak saplings were among the first plantings in the 2.5-acre botanical garden. On June 1, 1997, the Orto dei Semplici Elbano opened its gates to the public. Though there are many gardens on picturesque Elba, they are either acclimatization gardens, like the Ottone garden, or villa gardens filled with exotics more than natives. This new garden's goal of presenting an island flora in an artful garden setting is unique. Two years later, this child of the 460-year-old Botanical Garden of Pisa, was adopted by the Società Botanica Italiana, which was a prestigious honor.

The garden is meant to be a living library of plants of the archipelago and their relationship with humans, not only in the past and the present but also into the future. Divided into several specifically focused, smaller themed gardens, the intimacy encourages one to look closely at the plants. This is nowhere more evident than in il Labirinto, the labyrinth, whose raised beds feature medicinal plants of the island. It contains plants from the research of Professor Corsi, who interviewed Riesi on the historical and current uses of local plants. Her research, published in 1993 as *Elba, Isola d'Erba (Elba, Island of Weeds)* and illustrated with Louisa Perno's herbarium, was seminal in the creation of the garden. The seemingly

pejorative title was chosen to emphasize the long and important use of common plants of the island.



An arbor of heirloom grapes marks il Vigneto

An Elban Pharmacopeia

It may be surprising that some things in our refrigerators play prominent roles in the Elban pharmacopeia; for example, peppers (*Capsicum annum*) were used to treat stomach infections, and capers (*Capperis spinosa*) were used as an aphrodisiac. Two of our favorite landscape plants also appear here: strawberry tree (*Arbutus unedo*), used to treat stomach complaints, and dusty miller (*Senecio cineraria*), used to control menstrual pain.

Some wellknown weeds also figure in the Elban medicine cabinet; dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) is used to treat liver ailments, and nettles (*Urtica dioica*) are used, strangely enough, to soothe itching. Then there are the oddballs, the highly toxic squirting cucumber (*Ecballium elaterium*), once considered by the Greeks to be a panacea, and pellitory-of-the-wall (*Parietaria diffusa*), whose anti-viral properties are being investigated today for use in treatments against HIV.



Cyclamen hederifolium, native to the island of Elba

Beyond the walls of il Labirinto is il Frutteto, the fruit orchard, a collection of heirloom fruit trees. Botanist Augustino Stefani arduously searched abandoned and active farms of the archipelago for these trees. His collections, selected over the years for the drier and hotter climate of the islands, are a repository of genetic information that may, with global warming, be important to fruit-breeding programs in the future. An arbor of heirloom grapes of the island, called il Vigneto, graces the entrance to the garden; among others grown there is the Aleatico grape, used in making the distinctive Elban dessert wine of the same name.



The Aleatico grape, an island heirloom, is used in making the distinctive Elban dessert wine of the same name

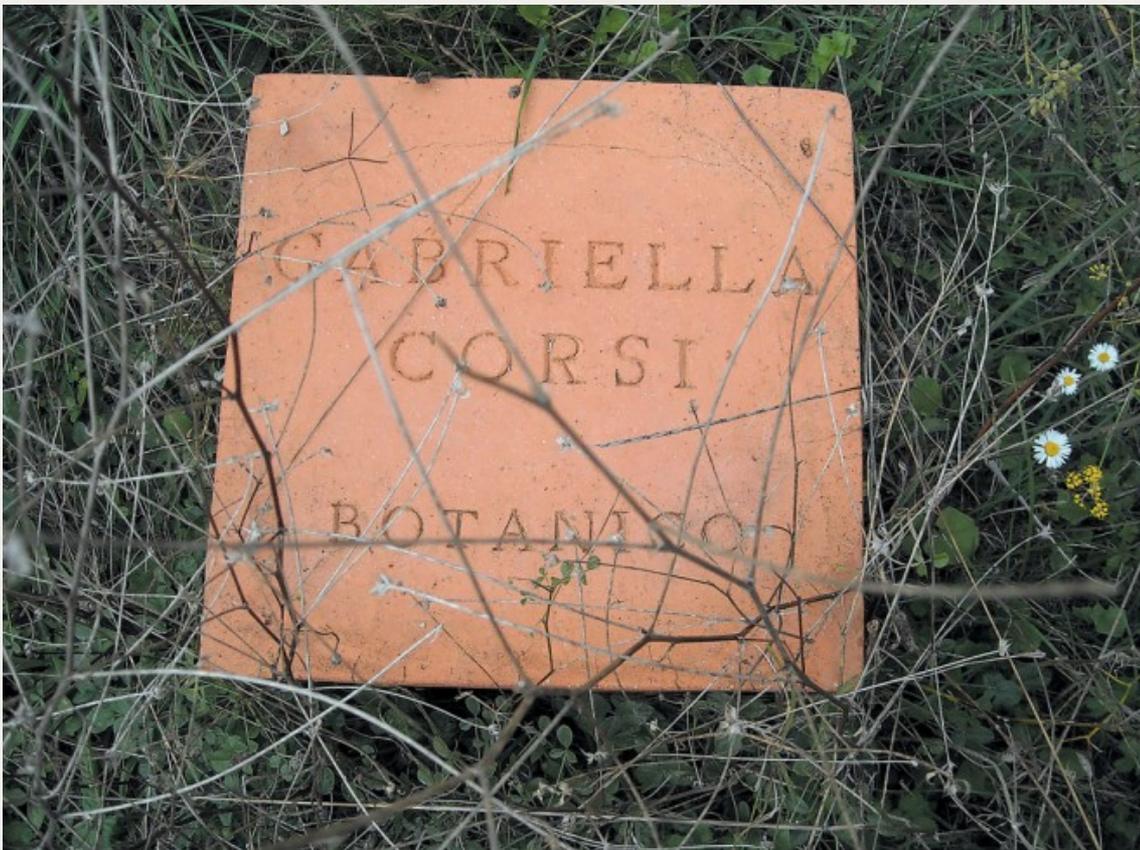
Island Endemism

Although separated from the mainland by the mere twelve-mile-wide Piombino Channel, there are fifty endemic (found nowhere else) and sub-endemic plants on the island, in addition to several endemic animals. Dr Gabari, who refers to the island as the “*Galapagos di casa nostra*,” the Galapagos at home, has taken intense interest in insular plant communities and sees them as laboratories under the sky. These endemics are represented in il Giardino delle Piante Endemiche, the garden of endemics. Of these, pink dusty miller (*Centaurea gymnocarpa*) is

already popular in California; the fine silver foliage of this vigorous, shrubby perennial, topped with thistlelike lavender blooms, is much superior to the common dusty miller and, although a perennial, blooms in one season from seed. The endemic toadflax (*Linaria capraia*) and Elban statice (*Limonium ilvae*) both show gardenworthy qualities but are not available commercially here.

Included in the garden is an amphitheater set in an olive grove, with a stone-lined bench carved into the hillside and enclosed by a rosemary hedge. Even when there are no performances to be seen, it offers visitors a stunning view, opened by years of mining that leveled a mountain, of the Tyrrhenian Sea to the east.

Like most gardens, there are renovations in progress. The ten-year-old il Giardino Argentato, the silver garden, a long border of silverleafed plants meant to be viewed in moonlight, is in the process of being replanted. There are also new developments: La Macchia Coltivata, a demonstration garden highlighting the ornamental qualities of maquis plants, is already underway, while il Giardino dei Venti, the garden of the winds, a meditation garden, is still on the drawing boards.



Each terra-cotta cube in the latest work of artist Cesario Carena honors someone integral to the revitalization of Santa Caterina; this cube honors Professor Gabriella Corsi, the botanist who helped create the Orto dei Semplici Elbano

A Peaceful Retreat

Even with all the developments at Santa Caterina over the past thirty years, it has never lost its original purpose as a place for retreat and study. Artists, writers, and gardeners from around the world go there yearly to work in the hermitage and garden. Their works can often be found in the church, which doubles as a gallery, but also in the garden itself. The works of artist Cesario Carena, a longtime friend of Berger and Santa Caterina, have become such integral parts of the garden that it would be hard to imagine it without them. Carena's latest work, installed in May 2005, entitled "Segni della Memoria e del Silenzio" ("Signs of Memory and of Silence"), honors people who have made significant contributions to the hermitage and the garden since its inception. The piece consists of two dozen terra-cotta cubes, each hand engraved with the name and profession of one of these individuals. They are strategically placed among the olives and oak trees and in a wild meadow. Like all of Carena's pieces, they are earthy and inviting, asking visitors to sit and reflect on the natural and man-made beauty around them.

With the mining gone and the economy of the Elba decidedly shifting toward tourism, a new value is seen in the island's dramatic ancient landscape. Though it is the beaches that draw the crowds in summer, it is the rugged mountainous landscape crossed with ancient trails that attracts European birders, botanizers, and photographers year-round.

Acknowledging this incredible natural legacy, the Parco Nazionale dell'Arcipelago Toscano was established in 1989. To date, it has preserved nearly 44,500 acres of the seven islands. Evergreen oaks are already returning to the stony silence of Monte Serra, now part of this park system, along with other plants nearly grazed to extinction by goats. In this ever-

changing landscape, the small the Orto dei Semplici Elbano waits, poised to play an important role in preserving the plants *and* the human knowledge of these plants, handed down over generations—perhaps eons—but still valuable today.

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