

PALERMO

TREASURE MAPS

Twenty Itineraries
Designed to Help
You Explore the
Cultural Heritage
of Palermo and
its Province

Soprintendenza per i Beni culturali
e ambientali di Palermo

BOTANICAL WONDERS PALERMO'S GARDENS AND PARKS

by **Giuseppe Barbera** and **Manlio Speciale**

REGIONE SICILIANA
Assessorato dei Beni culturali
e dell'Identità siciliana



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“Investiamo nel vostro futuro”

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THE ‘CONCA D’ORO’

At the end of 1100, Hugo Falcandus wrote, in his *Epistola* decrying the death of William II, a memorable description of the area surrounding Palermo: *“what a generous plain, worthy of being exalted at all times, generating every variety of tree and of fruit, offering every delicacy from every locality, and pleases, with the beauty of its luxuriant landscape, to such an extent, that whosoever is lucky enough to have seen it once, will have great difficulty, for whatsoever reason, to ever leave this place.”*

The connection with the plain enclosed between the Tyrrhenian Sea and the encircling mountains, has always been, in the history of Palermo, a distinguishing character. The fame of this territory will extend well beyond its local boundaries for its fertility and the beauty of its landscape. This territory was called the ‘Conca d’Oro’. The name *aurea concha* can be found, probably for the first time, in a 15th-century poem by Angelus Callimachus Siculus. The area has been a breeding ground

of original elaboration and cultural synthesis between different agrarian civilisations, a source of biodiversity, a centre for the propagation of agricultural and ornamental species, where also the history of gardens has marked important pages.

By virtue of the mild climate and of the abundant and varied sources of water, the area around Palermo has always been one large garden, lovely to behold and filled with every kind of produce. In the history of the Conca d’Oro or the Golden Shell, the landscape has always been dominated by the trees, which for centuries have been the main crop, substituting for the more usual Mediterranean natural ground cover.

The landscape has been made ‘fruitful and delightful’ by the serried ranks of market gardens and orchards, the centuries-old trees, last survivors of ancient plantations—the oldest known is the cypress in the Monastery of Santa Maria di Gesù, which in 2004,

1
Eriobotrya japonica,
the Japanese medlar



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2

Graffiti in the Grotto of the Addaura

when its age rings were counted, was found to be 426 years old—the biological diversity which has increased over the centuries and of course, the refreshing presence of running water.

Callias had already attested in the 4th-3rd century BC to the preeminent presence of trees in the 'Conca d'Oro'. He writes of a city "known as one vast orchard as it is full of fruit trees". However, it is with the Arab influence that the countryside takes on what is still today, wherever orchards and

gardens have survived, a mixture of utility and beauty. New species are imported from the orient: the bitter orange, the lemon, the sugarcane. Papyrus grasses grow in the swamps. This Arab radical agricultural revolution requires the input of the new Norman conquerors before it can evolve to its full extent and, in the 12th century, the visitor to Palermo is unstinting in his praise for the unexpected beauty of the city and the surrounding countryside.

Al-Idrisi, in 1139 writes "the rivers traverse

all of the capital of Sicily, where there are also inexhaustible sources of water. Palermo abounds in fruit trees... and inside the walls there is a triumph of orchards, magnificent villas and many slow moving streams, brought down from the mountains in canals". The protagonists are always the fruit trees and water, which together, in continuity with the thousand year old story of the oriental garden and its adaptation to the Mediterranean countryside, produce a crop that is economically interesting and climatically, environmentally and culturally of great importance. The trees, the water—in large reservoirs, lilypond, canals and fountains—the walled parks, pavilions that break up the monotony of the lawns, the panoramic position, its closeness to the woods all contribute to the 'delightful places' of which Falcandus writes: the '*solatia*' from where the sovereigns exercised their power, accompanied by pleasure and leisure, by

poetry and learned discourse, communing with nature by hunting. With the decline of the Norman Kingdom, many areas of the Palermitan plain reverted to pasture and grain, up until the 15th century, when the cultivation of cane sugar becomes popular. It was normally grown on small, specialised lots, but the overall quantity is such that problems soon arose due to the high concentration of fertilizers required, as well as water and wood to feed the presses that extract the sugar (in the so-called '*trappeti*'). The need for wood results in the rapid felling of the woods closest to the city, which in the mid 16th century appeared as though it was "surrounded by rugged mountains, high and steep, where there are no trees of any species to be seen", according to the historian Fazello. In the following century vineyards and olive groves become more popular but the cultivation of citrus fruit also makes progress with the

3
*Oranges depicted in an
Advertisement*





4
*The Landscape of the
Conca d'Oro*

certified arrival of the sweet orange in 1487, and in the following century the walled city appears to be surrounded by numerous wooded fields, as well as prickly pear shrubs, imported from Central America. The study of botany and agricultural sciences grows alongside the sophisticated techniques handed down through the generations of experienced farmers. In 1510, Antonino Venuto publishes *De Agricultura Opusculum*, considered to be the first treatise in the world to be dedicated entirely to fruit trees, and at the end of the following century Francesco Cupani publishes *Hortus Catholicus*, in which he describes the garden at Misilmeri of the Princes della Cattolica, listing over 300 varieties of fruit trees: almond, chesnut, cherry, fig, apple, pear, quince, rowan, apricot, peach, damson, walnut, hazelnut, olive, grapevine, orange, citron and lemon. Botanical and agricultural studies keep pace with the urban transformation, but the Conca d'Oro, to use the words of Villabianca, is - “an extremely elegant and vast amphitheatre, dressed all over in beautiful plants, market gardens

and orchards.” Filippo Nicosia outlines in his book *‘Il podere fruttifero e dilettevole’* [The Fruitful and Delightful Farm], the agricultural and landscape model of Palermo, underlining the double function assigned to a garden. The species and varieties described by Nicosia complete—with the additional of the azarole, the carob tree, the prickly pear, the jujube tree, the pomegranate, the mulberry, the winter medlar, the palm, the pistachio and the banana plant—the already long list supplied by Cupani and attest, yet again, to the great variety of the fruit germplasm.

The agriculture, in those years, improves and new green spaces spring up. - De Seta and Di Mauro write that the city of Palermo is becoming “filled with gardens, surrounded by an even larger garden”.

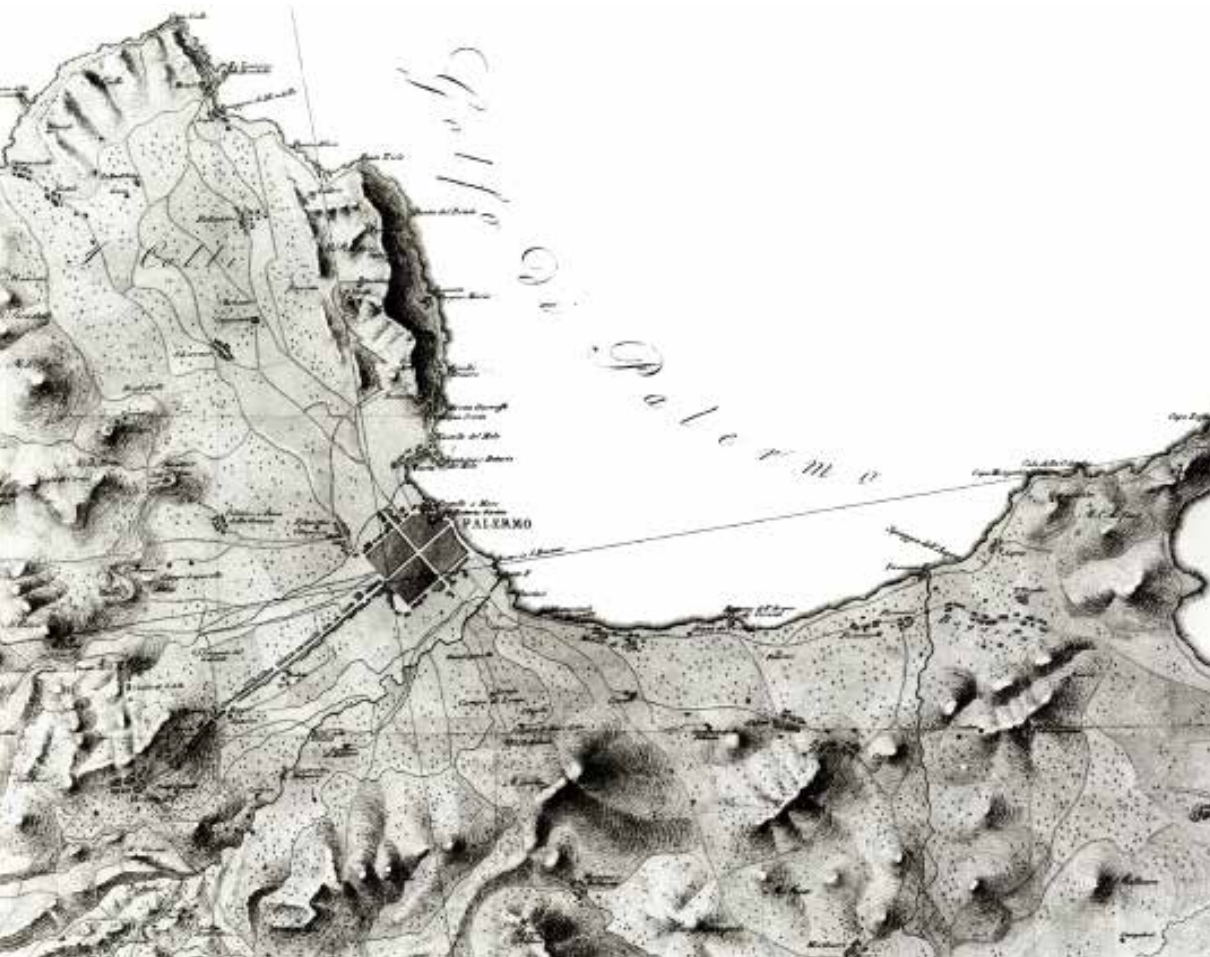
In the 18th century the well to do Palermitans, both the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, build more than 200 villas in the surrounding countryside. These are half way between a new type of social recreation and an investment in agriculture. New suburbs spring up along the roads that

connect the villas to the city and, towards the end of the century, the city itself spreads out from inside the walls that have protected it since the Middle Ages. With the creation, in 1778, of the *'Quattro Canti di Campagna'*, Palermo expands out in the direction of the *Piana dei Colli*.

Shortly before, in 1778, the first public villa in the city, called the Villa del Popolo and then later Villa Giulia, had been inaugurated on the *Piana di Sant'Erasmo*, in the opposite direction to the Colli. In 1789, the Botanical Gardens were transferred to the vineyards of

the Duke Vanni d'Archirafi, in proximity to this *'flora'*, (the name by which the pleasure gardens were called in order to differentiate them from the orchards). The Botanical Gardens had been created in 1781, in the cramped quarters of the Bastions of Porta Carini, under the aegis of the Accademia di Palermo and the Viceroy Caracciolo. It became, in its new quarters, one of the most advanced centres in Sicily, and for many years in Europe, for Botanical research and for the collection and cultivation of the more diverse species from all around the world.

5
The Conca d'Oro.
 Engraving taken from
 the "La topografia
 di Palermo e de' suoi
 contorni" [Palermo
 and its surroundings]
 by D. Scinà, 1818



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6
*View over the Conca
d'Oro*

A few years later, Ferdinand IV ordered the creation of the the 'Favorita', sited on the slopes of Mount Pellegrino and reaching the swamps of Mondello. However, in the mid 19th century that the landscape changes, taking on the appearance that, even nowadays, it is still possible to glimpse: tiny patches of green have survived amongst the suburban apartment blocks together with what remains of the agricultural zones of Ciaculli and Santa Maria di Gesù. Exploiting the opportunities offered of easy transport to the markets in the north, by the steamers and the first trains, the citrus fruit industry expands in the Conca d'Oro. This initiates a growth pattern that will result in its becoming the leading agricultural industry on the Island. In fact, no other fruit tree has so profoundly marked the Island agriculture and landscape. Its ornamental properties influenced the design of Mediterranean gardens and became the epitome of the southern myth and of eternal spring for the whole of Europe. The lemon is the most important species in the 19th century. The sweet orange is also of

importance, as well as the mandarin, which arrived from China via Malta and England at the beginning of the 19th century. The success of these citrus fruits is overwhelming. The landscape of the Conca d'Oro is revolutionised by new orchards: "*the wooded landscapes and the symmetrical gardens that used to adorn the buildings of the old barons, have all been sacrificed in the name of the citrus groves, with no hesitation whatsoever, placing profit before appearances*", notes an agronomist in 1875. The cultivation of mandarins follows on from that of oranges and lemons, decimated by plagues of 'Mal di gomma' and 'Mal secco' disease.

In order to gain space, the slopes of the mountains are terraced, and the Conca d'Oro now appears, to the observer, as an enormous scented forest. But it does not last for long. After the war, in the 1950's, the area is transformed by acres of asphalt and cement, the result of new housing for those who had lost their homes under the bombing, or for those moving in from the countryside. These are the terrible years of the 'Sack of Palermo' [the horrible construction boom that led to the destruction of the city's green belt]. Agriculture is abandoned and even the historical city gardens are gradually neglected. Palermo's great tradition of green spaces appears to have been lost and forgotten. But what remains of the citrus groves, the battered architectural and floral miracles of the historical gardens, the biodiversity of the plantations, it refers to a history that future generations must not only protect but also comprehend, as much as it is a valid example.

MAREDOLCCE - LA FAVARA

In the 12th century the Norman monarchs surrounded Palermo with parks, images of strength and dominion over a nature that has been subjugated for man's pleasure and desire for luxury. It is a tangible expression of a power that was also founded on the appropriation of a landscape and a way of life deriving from the culture of the subjugated Arabs, who for almost two hundred and fifty years had dominated Sicily.

The first of these parks is Maredolce-La Favara, was created by the wish of Roger II and constructed between 1130 and 1150,

overbuilt on Arab and even Roman remains. Roger ordered changes to both the fortified building known as the Castle of the Emir Jafar, and to a marsh land, which had formed in a dip fed by a large spring, that flowed out of the water table of Mount Grifone, known in Arabic as *Fawarra*. A dam, built of large stone slabs, further down the valley collected the water into a large reservoir. Here fish of all types were freed and the King used 'to enjoy his pleasure here with his women' in 'gold and silver-clad boats.' The walls of the park and the bottom of the reservoir were both

7
*The Castle of
Maredolce*



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8
The Genoard. From the manuscript "Liber ad honorem Augusti" by Peter of Eboli, 12th century

lined with rose coloured opus signinum, still existing today, and in the middle an island was created by covering a limestone rock outcrop with earth. From the Palace it was possible to enjoy views over the Tyrrhenian Sea as well as the minor sea, created by the waters of the *Fawarra*, which would soon be known as 'Maredolce'.

Favara still exudes the character of a medieval Islamic landscape, notwithstanding heavy structural interventions and unauthorised building; opposite the Palace, already partially restored, the basic structure of the reservoir, in its cones and construction elements, has to a large extent remained intact. On the island, which is also still visible, an old citrus grove is a throwback to its original purpose, though mandarins have replaced the date palms

and the bitter orange and lemon trees. The countryside around Maredolce – La Favara, was awarded in 2015, the 26th International Garden Award dedicated to Carlo Scarpa, in recognition of its exceptional nature and also for the risks that it runs of being buried under a flow of asphalt and cement. Roger also ordered a park neighbouring Maredolce, continuing into the mountains, which closed off the 'Conca d'Oro' to the southeast. Romuald of Salerno, chronicler of the period, writes that "he raised a Palace, to which the water was led in underground pipes from springs whence it flowed ever sweet and clear and certain hills and forests [around Palermo] he likewise enclosed with walls and there he made a Parco—a pleasant and delightful spot, shaded with various trees and abounding with deers, roes and wild boars." [At the Favara] "in the heat of the summer he would find solace at the Parco where, with a little hunting, he would relieve his mind from the cares and worries of the state". Hunting was also practiced in the Genoard Park— from the Arabic *jannat al ard* or 'Paradise on Earth'—which presumably included the pavilions of the Cuba, both large and little [the Cuba Soprana and the Cubola or Little Cuba], the Zisa and the Uscibene, depicting the landscape of a city that Al-Ibn Jubayr, visiting it between the end of 1184 and 1185 describes as "proudly set between its open spaces and plains filled with gardens and his palaces are systematically strung [around Palermo] like the necklaces around the throats of buxom women".

The Cuba overlooked a square pond, 80 metres each side, and even nowadays remains of the hydraulic plaster that covered it are still being found. The recent demolition of some of the buildings that suffocated it have opened up vistas of the building in all its splendour to the extent that it has been



suggested that it could well be restored in line with the history and the culture from which it originated. The Cuba Soprana is sited below the Cuba, and nowadays has been totally swallowed up by the 18th century Villa Napoli, and nearby, the little pavilion of the Cubula, which could well have been part of a pond fed by water that flowed out from the building. And finally, the most important of the Palermitan Norman Palaces, the Zisa, from *Aziz* (meaning noble, strong, glorious, splendid), commissioned by William I between 1164 and 1168 and finished by William II. Notwithstanding numerous and heavy interventions, the Palace has a distinct Fatimid architectural influence and its position enjoys all the advantages of being close to the sea and the mountains and “*This is the paradise on earth which comes into sight*”, verse to be found on the inscription. The architecture is clearly influenced by the concept of the *ryad*, and the pond, used to irrigate the gardens and orchards. In the centre, there was an island with a domed chiosco, connected to the *iwan*, which projected from the façade of the Palace, by a small canal, which opened out, and by shallow basins fed by a small cascade (*cadar or shardiwan*), which was sculpted and surmounted by mosaics depicting palms fruit

trees, exotic birds and archers. Leandro Alberti had written, in 1550, about these “*charming gardens that are full of citrons, lemons and oranges and other delightful fruits [planted in rows]*” which, until about ten years ago, still constituted the landscape. Since then, however, another more modern landscape has subverted the old order, endeavouring, with a profusion of marble and cement and a great deal of agronomic inexperience, to find some kind of trait d’union with the old Zisa but without succeeding.

9
Maredolce. Citrus grove of Citrus reticulata

10
The Mediaeval dam in Maredolce



11

*The Lake of
Maredolce. In the
centre, the wall of the
artificial island*



The methods of irrigation of the traditional agriculture in the Conca d'Oro are one of the most important legacies of the Islamic mediaeval agronomic cultivation. There are still visible traces in the countryside, and as tangible evidence of their profound cultural influence, the Sicilian dialect still contains many ancient Arabic words. Water was taken from a spring (alluvial fans) (*favara*, *fawwāra*), by wells drawing from the groundwater or via a *qanat* (artificial drainage galleries) that crossed underground. Water for irrigation was drawn up through a '*norīa*' (*nā'ūrah* – [a large wheel actoned by the water current]) or '*sēniā*' (*sāniya* – [water wheels used in vertical wells]). These were sited on a mound sufficiently raised to permit the water to fall through the natural force of gravity, into a large basin (*gebbia*, *gābiyah*) and conducted, after having passed through various small wells (*risittaculi*, from the Latin *receptaculum*, tank, or *gibbiuni*), permitting a subdivision via small open air brick irrigation channels (*saja*, *sāqīya*) and terracotta conducts ('*turciunati*', underground pipes, or *incatusati* [water supply

systems] formed by conical clay pipes known as '*catusi*', (*qādūs*, conduct) allowing them to be interconnected on carefully levelled soil, so as to permit irrigation without damaging the ground or causing excess humidity. The water arrives through '*cunnutti*' (conducts, artificial underground channels) to the planting beds known as '*casedde*' (plots of land), of a regular shape, either square or rectangular, bounded by triangular banks of earth known as '*furre*', that are breached when the '*prise*' (water intake systems) are opened when water is sent to the plots (watering). Water is sent to the cultivated plants with the aid of hoes, along a series of banks and planting beds that insure the least possible loss of water and prove the farmers' know-how. A group of '*casedde*' are known as a '*ringata*' and when in series then as a '*salibbnā*' (*salība*, crossroads). The '*casedde*' are divided in turn by mounds known as '*vattali*' (*baṭl*, small mound). The water is measured in hoes (in Italian '*zappa*' (hoe) from the mediaeval Latin name *sap(p)a* or the Arabic *sabba*, poured water) equal to four '*darbs*' (In Arabic *darb*, narrow passageway, water measurement unit).

VILLA GIULIA

The first public garden was created in Palermo between 1777 and 1779 by decision of the 'Pretore' of Palermo, the Marquis of Ragalmici, who dedicated it to Giulia Guevara, wife of the Viceroy Marcantonio Colonna. It was designed by Nicolò Palma, who planned a formal garden outside the city walls, at the end of esplanade. It had a geometric layout with both perpendicular and diagonal paths neatly dividing up the square space. The main entrance, through a monumental arch, leads directly to a statue, by Ignazio Marabitti, of the Genio of Palermo sited on a bluff, nursing a snake, with a dog at his feet and a cornucopia, symbolising prudence, fidelity and abundance. From its inception the garden is a great success. It is heavily frequented by the locals, who during the Feast of Santa Rosalia, flock to the garden drawn by the decorations and fire works. The foreign visitors find the vegetation, visible from the sea, irresistible, creating for them a lasting memory. J. Wolfgang Goethe, the most illustrious visitor, in 1787 wrote "*It is the most wonderful place in the world : regularly laid out by art, it still looks a fairy spot ; planted but a short time ago, it yet transports you into ancient times.*" Goethe lingers over some of the various aspects of the vegetation, in enclosures, and the avenues of poplars and elms—"*citron-espaliers arch over low-arborescent walks ; high walls of the oleander...*" And he is carried away by plants that he himself considers to be exotic. "*trees, wholly strange and unknown to me, as yet without leaf, and probably, therefore, natives of a still warmer climate, spread out their strange-looking branches.*" "*The many plants which I was formerly only accustomed to see in pots and tubs, indeed only behind glass windows for*

most of the year, stand here fresh and gay under the open sky".

Villa Giulia is built almost at the same time as the Botanical Gardens of Palermo. The latter is a solemn temple dedicated to the Goddess of Flowers and to the *scientia amabilis*,

12
Araucaria
cunninghamii



13

*The flowering and
fruiting of the Brahea
armata*



Botany; the former, Villa Giulia, is a pleasure garden and an authentic green living room for the City. The path, inside the Botanical Gardens, which nowadays houses most of the collection of potted plants, at the end of the 18th century was still a public thoroughfare and the visitor could decide whether to enter a place of study and science or replenish his spirit relaxing or just in contemplation. In fact, exactly there, behind the 'Fountain of the Genio', there is a secondary entrance to Villa Giulia and still in the same area, but nowadays inside the Botanical Gardens, two tall columns, bearing the statues of Dioscorides and Theophrastus, signal the entrance to the Botanical Museum. It is no coincidence that on top of the column, the statue of Dioscorides, father of botanical pharmaceuticals and that of Theophrastus, father of botanical science, are there to invite you to take your first steps inside the Gardens. Villa Giulia, which will also become known as The Flora or the Public Gardens, will in the future be subject to a great deal of restoration and requalification. The most important is at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the following century, which, whilst retaining for the most part the formal architectural layout, effectively alters its severity and the geometrical perfection of the flowerbeds, originally based on the illuministic style. Pompeiian exedras, designed by G. Damiani Almeyda and made in 1866, replace 4 "pagoda-like small theatres for listening to music", a new entrance from Via Lincoln is added in 1864 and new, luxuriant subtropical species, originating from all over the world are planted. A romantic hillock, with artificial ruins is also added in the 19th century, together with a small lake, a belvedere, a zoo

14
Villa Giulia



(initiated in 1871 with the donation of two chinese pheasants and towards the end with a mangy lion named 'Ciccio'), a children's train, a large collection of statues with busts of famous poets and musicians and the 'cemetery for famous Sicilians'.

The florule, in its original version, has been heavily transformed, due to the variety of styles adopted between the 18th century and today. Worth mentioning are: the avenue planted with *Washingtonia robusta*, leading from the Via Lincoln entrance and now over a hundred years old; the interesting shapes created from the Spirea (*Spirea xvanhuottei*), romantic and invaluable, part of the Rosaceae family with white flowers in the spring, typical of most of the historical gardens in Palermo; the woodland of Brachychiton with its pink flowers, (*Brachychiton discolor*),

[Lacebark Tree] immediately to the right of the Lincoln gate, creating for the visitor a surreal and fairylike effect by the incredible symmetry of its layout. All along the railings that border the Botanical Gardens, are numerous examples of plane trees and a

15
Opuntia dejecta,
an unusual Central-
American succulent





16
Spiraea xvanhouttei,
in flower

17
A view of the garden;
in the foreground
Cycas revoluta

large flowerbed with diverse species of palm trees, including the *Phoenix reclinata*, from Southern Africa and extraordinary examples of the rare Guatemalan *Brahea calcarea*, next to the infrequently seen *Brahea armata*, with their very long branches of white flowers. Two widely spaced, towering Australian primaeval araucaria, known as Hoop pines are visible from all over the garden (*Araucaria cunninghamii*). On the hillock are the succulents, and amongst the Agave and the *Dracaena* there is a particular Prickly pear, the *Opuntia dejecta* with small joints and very geometric



18

*Villa Giulia,
the famous tree-
lined avenue of
Washingtonia robusta*

in shape. Around the Lincoln gate the large flowering shrubs, in serried ranks of purple, emerge from the shiny, pinnate leaves of an Araliaceae and slightly further in there is a flowerbed with a conifer of the Podocarpaceae family surrounded by a Casuarina of the Casuarinaceae family, placing side by side, as a kind of botanical 'joke', a Gymnosperm resembling an Angiosperm with an Angiosperm resembling a conifer. One of the inner paths is planted with *Calliandra portoricensis*, a fluffy flowering Mimosa, interspersed with trees of Bitter Oranges. On the left, entering from Via Lincoln, a large space is taken over by monumental and ancient specimens of trees from the *Yucca*, *Dracaena*, *Aloe* and *Nolina* families. Other trees and shrubs are to be found further in: species such as Lime, Horse chestnut, Holm oak as well as Boxwood, Golden dewdrop, and the Spindle tree amongst others, all enrich this evocative location, of which Goethe was so enamoured.



In was in the Botanical Gardens in Padua that Goethe first imagined that the extraordinary diversity of the plant kingdom derived from a single [primal] plant. He searched for proof of a theory that would confute Linnaeus's idea that reduced a natural complexity, which to him appeared indivisible, to a systematic hierarchy. Linnaeus searched for diversity, Goethe for similarity. The theory came to the fore once again in Villa Giulia: *"In the presence of so many new and renovated forms, my old fancy occurred to me again: Might not I discover the Urpflanze, the primordial plant among all these numerous specimens? Some such there must be! For, otherwise, how*

am I able at once to determine that this or that form is a plant, unless they are all formed after one original type?" On the return journey to Naples he came back to the same argument, declaring himself ready to publish his findings. But then, in the course of his intellectual maturation, when he wrote his "Metamorphosis of Plants", every mention of the original plant disappeared and he returned to the question that ends the entry in his diary for on Tuesday, 17th April in Palermo: *"Why is it that we moderns have so little concentration of mind? Why is it that we are thus tempted to make requisitions which we can neither exact nor fulfil?"*.

THE BOTANICAL GARDEN

Since its founding between 1789 and 1795, the Botanical Gardens have amassed an amazing selection of plants and of fascinating people. Its 10 hectares make it one of the largest Botanical Gardens in Italy and it certainly owns the largest collection of subtropical specimens, either potted or or planted out. It is older than the University degli Studi of Palermo and nowadays it is its pride and joy. The French Architect Léon Dufourny (1754-1818), who lived in Palermo from 1785-1793, designed the main buildings. It was an inspiration for all the gardens created in the following two centuries, and nowadays is undoubtedly still a fundamental reference both for its architectural value and for the way in which the exotic species are selected, acclimatised and propagated. To consider it a mere



19
Cycas revoluta, male strobilus

20
Encephalartos ferox, female strobilus



historical garden is therefore diminishing its importance. It is a living museum, where every *taxon* is planted on the basis of purely scientific criteria, either in systematic or thematic collections. The layout of the garden is therefore relatively complicated, but can be summed up in four successive phases of expansion. The original rectangular layout was divided into four quadrangles or quatrains, according to according to the *Carolus Linnaeus system of classification*, with four buildings the *Gymnasium*, the *Calidarium*, the *Tepidarium* and the *Aquarium*, a large pool. The magnificent *Winter Garden* should in no way be forgotten, known as the 'Serra Carolina, a gift from Caroline of Bourbon a short time after the garden's foundation. Later, a large area was acquired mid-19th century; this is the area where today the



21
Ceiba speciosa,
flowering

22
The Botanical Garden,
the Winter Garden





Giant Ficus is planted, together with the surrounding area and an additional piece of land. Even later, towards the end of the 19th century, but put into effect at the beginning of the 20th century, additions to the Garden include the *Engler System*—an area dedicated to the German botanist of Polish origin, Heinrich Gustav Adolf Engler (1844–1930)—and the area originally known as the ‘Colonial Garden’—due to the provenance of the plants—but nowadays known as the *Experimental Sector*. In the course of these events, other graceful buildings have been added, underscoring its Museum aspect, offering multiple opportunities for educational, artistic and above all scientific exhibitions. The florule is composed of thousands of species belonging to thousands of *taxa*. Amongst all the magnificent specimens perhaps the most important is the *Ficus macrophylla* f. *columnaris*, the originating Ficus of the historical gardens of Palermo; the towering *Araucaria columnaris*, about 40 metres tall and therefore the tallest tree of the city of Palermo; the soap tree (*Sapindus mukorossi*), which still continues to amuse the children; the Viale De Leo, known as the Viale delle Chorisie—*Ceiba speciosa*—, lined with this almost surreal South American tree. The collection of Cicadae (*Cycadatum*) and the collection of Palm trees (*Palmetum*), are nowadays amongst the most representative of Europa.

23

Ceiba speciosa, detail
of the trunk

THE FAVORITA

The park of the Favorita, nowadays part of the Riserva Naturale regionale di Monte Pellegrino, is a residual, exemplary and precious witness of the history of the Conca d'Oro, of the city of Palermo and its everchanging landscape. This green space, managed by the Association Rangers d'Italia, is exceptional both for its dimensions (235 hectares) and for its position, in which both the importance of the historical gardens and the traditional agricultural landscapes play a role, in addition to its natural beauty. The Favorita was founded in 1799, when Ferdinand IV of Bourbon, fleeing from Naples, bought from some aristocratic

Palermitans, the *Casina Lombardo* (nowadays known as the *Palazzina Cinese*) on the Piana dei Colli and 'other countryside locations'. Right from the start it is a mixture of a pleasure park, an area for the production and experimentation of agricultural produce and an oasis for hunting, shooting and fishing including the swamps of Mondello and the highlands of Mount Pellegrino. In 1816 a guide book describes it as an area that is important for its cultural, environmental and agricultural values: *"the land is divided into fields for sowing wheat and every sort of pulses, in grassland, gardens, orchards, woodlands, olivegroves, vineyards and market*

24
Casina Cinese,
Parterre





25

Citrus reticulata, a mandarin flower

gardens. Long, pleasant paths and roads flanked by wild trees and fruit trees, offering shade... open spaces with trees and seats to rest and enjoy the pleasant cool air".

26

Eucalyptus grandis

Even nowadays, waiting to undertake that long and complicated journey that will transform it into an urban park, in line both with its history and with the modern city's need for an ecosystem based approach, the Favorita manages to keep together the naturalistic and cultural values of the historic garden and traditional agricultural landscapes. The former are visible above all on the slopes of Mount Pellegrino, where there are areas of high biodiversity, often the only patches left of the original vegetation of the Conca d'Oro. Holm oaks, Phillyrea, Mastic, Viburnum, Mediterranean Buckthorn, Strawberry trees [*Corbezzolo*],

create large areas of Mediterranean woody scrub land, which connects with the rocky scrub on Mount Pellegrino, with its vertical limestone rock faces, lit by the sun during the day, where Olive trees, Tree Spurges, Caper bushes, Dwarf palms, grow together with Prickly pears, and in the area recently reforested, with Pines and Eucalyptus trees. In the Favorita there is a large 5-hectare wood of Holm oaks, known as the Niscemi Wood, which, although originally planted by man, has nowadays reverted to its natural state. The Favorita is still, to a large extent, agricultural land, a reminder of the cultural landscape of the Conca d'Oro, which almost everywhere else has been destroyed. The agricultural systems adopted have been prevalently the arboricultural care of fruit trees, both on dry land and by means of irrigation, together with arable land produce.





The historical documents that accompanied the sale of the land to Ferdinand IV, the description by Gaspare Palermo, the notice of sale by auction in the mid 19th century and the document of 1856 by Francesco Gottuso have all provided ample evidence of this. Over the course of time, given the increased availability of water for irrigation due to the introduction of new technologies, this latter technique has become prevalent and the Favorita has increased its ground surface coverage of Citrus fruits, trees that unite economic and esthetical values in an almost exemplary fashion. From the original 1,249 *piedi di agrome*, already present in the Fondo Lombardo in 1799, to the earliest mandarins imported from the Orient via Malta, and contested, in 1810, with the Botanical Gardens for the primacy of their introduction into Italy, other mixed fruit orchards of Figs, Apricots, Almonds and Medlars are also added.

The Favorita is above all, a historical garden, whose importance is to be seen



27
The Favorita.
Semicircle of
Cupressus
sempervirens and the
Hercules Fountain

28
Ficus altissima, detail
of the inflorescences

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29

The Park of the Favorita

not only in the layout—divided into three large sectors by the paths of Hercules and Diana, filled with basins, small towers, buildings of excellent artistic taste—but also of the complex of the Casina Cinese and Villa Niscemi, in which various styles of landscapes are connected together in an interesting circuit, recently made possible by the closure to traffic, but still afflicted

by decay and negligence: the Italianate garden, the Chinese pavilion, the french embroidered garden, the informal English garden which nowadays has been relegated to the role of a children's playground (noble but degrading). The Italianate garden stretches from the Casina Cinese to Piazza Niscemi, on both sides of the wide entrance path, nowadays asphalted. The





French garden is behind the Casina Cinese, and consists of a classic *parterre de broderie* made out of hedges of *Duranta erecta*, rather strangely interspersed by topiaried Mediterranean scrub bushes. On the east side of the parterre there is an excellent example of metal cradle frame, over which the *Distictis buccinatoria* climbs, exhibiting its flamboyant yellowish orange flowers. Further still, a fragment of the garden, where the morphology of the land has been used for effect, incorporating a large bank of calcarenite and where, after successive

interventions the 'Children's Playground' has been installed.

This landscaped fragment was designed by G.V. Marvuglia, who took his inspiration from the English landscaped parks. It has been heavily altered over time, and only the morphology of the ground remains, (the abrupt change in level with respect to the *parterre*, the rocks that emerge, the artificial cavities) which definitely dictated the layout. Numerous elements, such as the coniferous woodland, have only recently been planted probably some time around the 1950's.

30
Olea europaea, a
centennial olive tree

THE GARDEN OF THE PALAZZO DEI NORMANNI

31
Strelitzia nicolai,
originating from South
Africa

32
Strelitzia reginae,
species dedicated
to Queen Sophia
Charlotte of
Mecklenburg-Strelitz

The Bastione San Pietro was built in 1560 at the time of the fortification of the city of Palermo, not only to protect the Royal Palace but also to provide it with a garden. Initially it was intended to be an 'Italian Garden', in the Renaissance style, dotted with fountains and embellished with statues, according to a description back in the 17th century. But there is nothing left of this garden, as between late 18th and early 19th century, the garden changed

its look and assumed an aspect inspired by the French style garden, following the fashion of the time. The historical events, the uprisings, and sieges inevitably lead to its gradual decline, occasionally interrupted by botanical interventions, which introduce new species into the garden. During and immediately after the last World War, an area is occupied by squatters who cultivate citrus fruits, grain and vegetables, until at the end of the 1940's, the Garden is given over into the care of the Regione Siciliana, together with the Palace.

Nowadays, the layout of the Garden is very informal, irregular, almost eccentric, but inviting thanks to its dense vegetation. From the entrance one immediately notices a large example of a *Cycas revoluta*, but the garden then becomes somewhat disordered. Three *Ficus macrophylla* f. *columnaris*, which have been allowed to grow unhindered, irremediably spoil the entire garden. In the vicinity of the entrance, a large *Pinus pinea*, nowadays almost completely





embraced by the over-enthusiastic growth of one of the three *Ficus*, is a clear indication of the supremacy of the tropical species over the traditional Italian ones. There is a conspicuous number of exuberant *Strelitzia* (both *Strelitzia reginae* and *Strelitzia nicolai*) and *Araliaceae*. Worth mentioning for their longevity are some Holm Oaks and some Pine trees, both the Aleppo Pine and domestic versions, which were planted in the central zone of the historic garden, probably some time before 1848. There is also a particularly expressive *Sophora secundiflora*.

Some of the *taxa* can be considered exclusive to this historic garden; these include: the *Halleria lucida*, the *Persea indica*, the *Ficus lyrata* and the *Schefflera elegantissima*. These last two species are common houseplants or potted plants, but planted out in this garden and having reached sizeable dimensions, they contribute to the overall tropical atmosphere of the complex. Considering its long history and its radical transformations over time, this garden, with the necessary care and attention, could well become one of the most interesting historic gardens of Palermo.

33
Ficus lyrata, from
 tropical Africa

FOSSA DELLA GAROFALA

The valley of the River Kemonia, is known as the Fossa della Garofala (Fossa, a short, narrow valley, enclosed by subvertical banks, carved out by a creek) because it once belonged to a rich merchant, Onorio Garofala back in the 15th century. At the end of the 18th century, due to frequent inundations from the river, it was reclaimed and the valley made suitable for agricultural exploitation. Giuseppe Reggio, Prince of Aci, bought several tracts of this uncultivated land starting from 1797 and radically altered it. According to a city guide of the time *“there are irrigated lawns... large market gardens full of various plants and many other areas are covered in strawberry plants, both local and foreign. There are vineyards with different grape varieties, even exotic kinds. There is a copious number of fruit trees of all sorts and an infinite quantity of woodland trees, both of which are spread over the different terrains either flat or forming small hillocks*

(hilly) as well as various valleys, all of which create a variety of landscapes that are pleasing to the eye of those who are taking a stroll. There is abundant water, brought here expressly from the Gabriele, and which is stored in urns and fountains. A number of benches, vases and marble statues adorn this villa and there are grottoes, both natural and artificial, which are used as stables and animal shelters”. An old building is also transformed into what becomes the Palazzo d’Orléans in 1809, when Ferdinand IV buys the estate and gifts it to his daughter Maria Amelia on the occasion of her marriage to Louis Philippe d’Orleans.

On this occasion the Marquis de Flers describes Palermo as a *“garden city par excellence, the date palm, the banana and the coconuts tree grow everywhere; we found here, more so than in Naples, the luxuriant vegetation of the Orient.”* In 1844 Maria Amalia gifts the Palazzo to her son Henry

34

Quercus ilex





of Aumale and the park is enlarged and enriched until it covers 67 hectares and is one of the largest estates in the Conca d'Oro. Great changes are made mid 20th century when a part of the estate is acquired by the University of Palermo, who then build the Agricultural Faculty, with obvious reference to the Modernist style of architecture. The Fossa della Garofala stretches out behind the Faculty, far beyond the University grounds. A green wedge that reaches from the Conca

d'Oro to the Palazzo dei Normanni in the city-centre: from the romantic gardens of the Orléans to the more recent Cassarà park, across experimental fields, old groves of citrus fruit, woods of Holm oak and Carob trees planted along what had once been the banks of an ancient river. An itinerary through the history and the nature of Palermo, which, unfortunately, is nowadays only accessible in parts, and which is waiting to be retrieved.

35
Ceratonia siliqua, the carob tree

36
Ailanthus altissima, infructescences

In 1891 René Bazin narrates how, having been invited to visit the Palazzo d'Orléans, he was fascinated by the panorama from one of the terraces: "*Such a magnificent view over the Conca d'Oro, Palermo and the grey mountain range of Mount Pellegrino... over the sparkling sea in the background, that one could spend hours just listening to this landscape that sings all by itself, rather like the Bay of Naples, if one stands very still*". The French writer admires the ornamental garden, the exotic trees and the collection of citrus fruits; "*all kinds of oranges and lemons are here, those that are bitter and those that are sweet, red, yellow and green, citrons, mandarins that resemble Christmas tree*

lights and grapefruit that would fit into the bottom of a silk hat.... Then the park becomes an orchard and fields of prickly pear follow on from olive groves". The most surprising thing is the Prickly pear. His guide book narrates that "*with two dozen prickly pears... a Sicilian can breakfast, have lunch, dine and sing during the interval*" and he regrets that it is not the right time of the year to enjoy them. "*It is a pity His Excellency to taste the prickly pear before the first rains!... after it has absorbed the rain it is they are delicious, and one can state that no better sorbet exists*".

THE PARK OF THE PRINCE OF CASTELNUOVO

37

*Alpinia zerumbet, the
flashy blooms*

This “house in the hills for the enjoyment of the season of flowers” is built in the second half of the 18th century along the road from the Royal Favorita, which also reaches the swamps of Mondello. A cartographer in 1863 depicts it as being mostly covered by agricultural cultivations of olives, white ash, citrus fruit, and pistachio nuts, crossed by tree-lined paths, and to the north, a Secret Garden bordered by cypress trees with, at its centre, a statue of *‘Armonia’* by Marabitti and a geometric *parterre* divided into four compartments. Originally a “garden of delight”, (it also had a maze), the Park changes aspect and purpose when Carlo Cottone, Prince of Castelnuovo, in 1816

takes refuge there after a political incident. He had at first been on the winning side of the struggle for the Sicilian Constitution of 1812, which abolished feudalism, but then successively on the losing side for his intransigent position as a reformer. The Prince, having retreated to his Villa dei Colli, does not renounce his liberal ideas. Aware of the importance of agriculture for the economic development of Sicily, he dedicates himself to the improvement of agricultural technology and the formation of competent farmers, founding an Agricultural Seminary. To this end he alters the layout of the Park, in order to make it more functional for agricultural experimentation. Furthermore,





38
Cyperus papyrus. To the left an Ipomoea alba

39
Fountain by Marabitti

in order to define the plan's aims, he has cornucopias and agricultural tools, the fork and the scythe applied in stucco on the pilasters of the main entrance, in Via San Lorenzo together with an inscription on the gate: "*e proprio delicio publica utilitas*". A tree-lined avenue of cypresses, now over a hundred years old, leads to the neo-classic Gymnasium, evidently inspired by the works of Dufourny in the Botanical Gardens of Palermo, designed by Antonino Gentile. The Prince's dream only comes true after his death, thanks to Ruggero Settimo and the Directors, distinguished agronomists, Giuseppe Inzenga and Ferdinando Alfonso Spagna. In the wake of their teachings the cultivation of citrus fruits begins to be introduced throughout the Piana dei Colli, and it transforms itself from 'the squalid shell' into a large and compact citrus grove like the rest of the Conca d'Oro, originally far more fertile. The importance attributed to the citrus fruits leads to the creation of a collection of numerous species and varieties. Inzenga updates the Library,





40
Lilypond. In the foreground a flowering
Nelumbo nucifera

forms a dendrological collection of some 147 different types of wood from as many trees, buys and tries out ploughs, harrows, harvesters, threshing machines and hydraulic machines from more agriculturally advanced countries.

The more recent years are years of neglect. The Ornamental Garden is bought by The

Ente Autonomo Teatro Massimo in 1955 for the creation of the Teatro di Verdura (moving the statue by Marabitti from its original location), but the Park itself awaits a future that will return it to its original vocation, the formation of able academics and technicians for the development of the cultural landscapes of Sicily.

THE GIARDINO INGLESE

An ‘English style’ garden was created between 1850 and 1851, along the road, built in 1848, “to give work to the people and beautify the city”, baptised “*della Libertà*” [of Liberty], and which prolonged Via Maqueda beyond the ‘Quattro Canti di Campagna’ in the direction of the Favorita. A landscape was created using the irregularities of the ground, the ravines and grottoes and the remains of an ancient stone quarry. It was a reference to Romantic painters, to the idealisation of nature and to the fashion born a century earlier in England, that was influenced by the uneven forms of the countryside. The author of the project was Giovan Battista Filippo Basile, as suggested by Vincenzo Tineo, Director of the Botanical Gardens in Palermo.

The avenue divided the garden into two: the *Bosco* [woodland] and the *Parterre* [French formal garden], nowadays named after Giovanni Falcone and Francesca Morvillo [victims of the Mafia]. The *Bosco* has, unfortunately, lost most of the complex structure designed by Basile. Following the asperities of the terrain ‘promontories’ and ‘valleys’ it recreated—with the addition of

pagodas, castles and Saracen towers, temples and busts of classical personalities—exotic spaces with evocative corners reproposing ‘*the ancient garden of delights*’ of the Emir al-Akhal’. The *Parterre* contained the *Boschetto del Fauno* [Grove of the Faun], two basins, a great lake and on the rocky walls a naturally created grotto.

Basile’s interpretation of an ‘English’ Garden includes the classical winding paths and the rolling lawns, but the entire area is planted with flowers originating from very different latitudes.

Basile, in fact personalised his gardens by the use of exotic trees, which adapted themselves to the irregular forms of the romantic landscape and not at all to the formal geometrics of 18th century gardens. A subtropical flora made up of dozens and dozens of species, some also originating from the Botanical Gardens, meant planting thousands of trees, shrubs, bulbs and grasses. The result was supposed to be—and still is, extraordinary: enormous *Ficus macrophylla* f. *columnaris*, the scented *Sophora secundiflora*, the *Cycas revoluta*, *Dracaena draco*, *Oreopanax*

41

Araucaria luxurians,
male strobili

42

Oreopanax
dactylifolius, *foliation*





43
Brachychiton
acerifolius

44
Opuntia tomentosa,
in the centre; on the
right the rare hybrid
between the Jubaea
and the Butia

dactylifolium, *Bambusa vulgaris* “Vittata”, *Jacaranda mimosifolia*, *Phytolacca dioica*, *Ficus rubiginosa*, the rare *Araucaria luxurians*, a hybrid palm from the *Butia capitata* and *Jubaea chilensis* known also as the ×Jubutia, the Australian flame tree (*Brachychiton acerifolius*) by ruby red flowers and of particular note the sacred *Ficus benghalensis*, a clear touch of the ‘tropical atmosphere’ during the hot summer Sundays, as a reference to the colourful fabrics—stretched out over the aerial roots of the *Ficus*—of parents and children of Indian descent. The *Quisqualis indica*, an eccentric tropical climbing plant in the *parterre* should not be



overlooked. V. Tineo, at the time Director of the Botanical Gardens, almost certainly helped to compile the list of the numerous species of plants. Chosen to complement the diverse garden locations this list well represent, in the numerous exotic species, the role played by the Botanical Gardens in the Palermitan context.

The many alterations carried out in successive periods do not eradicate the original idea. Some have interpreted, in a different manner, monumental elements realised initially, such as the equestrian statue of Giuseppe Garibaldi by Vincenzo Ragusa, with a lion at its base, made by Mario Rutelli, erected where the large lake used to be and inaugurated on the occasion of the National Exhibition in 1891-92. Other interventions have eliminated grottoes and uneven ground and covered in asphalt and cement—a blasphemy for an English garden—the area where once there was a large pine wood, which is, par excellence, the heart of a romantic garden. Other interventions destined a large area as a children’s playground, who were evidently considered unable to appreciate in any other manner the charm of a garden extremely rich in nature and history.

“...it is a garden of rare elegance, regal, full of light and shadows, full of greenery and mystery, with its slopes, the hiding places and pretty walkways, long flower filled paths; where during the quiet afternoons the nannies bring their charges to play and amuse themselves participating in thousands of games; where musical bands give concerts; where night time festivals, concerts, lotteries, exhibitions are also

held; my carriage passed by and the ‘Giardino Inglese’, appeared as a mysterious field, a pagan garden inhabited by mythological statues; and in this last heavenly glory, this rich profusion of greenery propagated in a strange manner, filled with deep shadows”.

Adriana de Saint-Louis, in *La Sicile Illustrée*, 1904

THE GIARDINO GARIBALDI

Giovan Battista Filippo Basile received the commission in 1863 from the Palermo City Council, to create a 'Garden Square', a square of Anglo-Saxon inspiration, in the area known as the Piano della Marina, an irregular quadrilateral, surrounded by monumental Palazzi, which had once been the place for Executions, as well as a place for shows and for fun-fairs. With the collaboration of Vincenzo Tineo, he created a Park not much larger than a hectare, with winding paths, lawns, planter beds full of a variety of trees.

Work on the Garden started in the autumn of 1863, with the creation of a central basin with *"gushing water so that the air is refreshed and the plants are watered"* and the garden is delimited by a wrought-iron fence designed by Basile himself *"that will represent the hunt; the columns will support birds and rabbits and the hunters' bags, and the balustrades will be shaped like bows and arrows ..."*.

In the spring of 1864, the trees and shrubs are planted, and form the definitive layout of the garden itself, together with *"the gently winding paths"* and the open rolling lawns.

45

Ficus macrophylla f. columnaris



46
Gardenia thunbergia



In the same year Basile realises a shelter for the gate-keeper, the so-called 'Swiss Chalet', at the West gate of the garden.

The plants still in existence are only a part of those planted originally. The most representative is the *Ficus macrophylla* f. *columnaris* with its gigantic canopy and there are also several unique specimens, such as the only example in the city of a rare Mexican oak, (*Quercus polymorpha*) on the right of the entrance gate in front of the chalet, the podocarp of the Himalaya (*Podocarpus nerifolius*), a Tree Gardenia from South Africa (*Gardenia thunbergia*)

47
Sophora secundiflora





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Roldana petasitis

with large, scented white flowers and just like those in the Giardino Inglese, an impressive hybrid of *Butia capitata* crossed with *Jubaea chilensis* also known as \times *Jubutia*. In the spring an ancient example of *Sophora secundiflora* with loose, bluish violet flower clusters, which scent the entire garden and *Roldana petasitis*,

Leonotis leonurus and *Sparmannia africana* colour the garden yellow, orange and white respectively. There are also Jacarandas and Araucarias that live happily side by side with Mediterranean plants such as the Holm oak, the Carob tree, the Laurel and Oleanders.





50
Ficus macrophylla
f. columnaris. View
 from Palazzo Steri

The Ficus of the Giardino Garibaldi, with a spread of over fifty metres and thirty metres tall is—according to the ‘Accademia dei Georgofili’—the largest tree in Europe. Introduced by the Botanical Gardens around 1845 as a *Ficus nervosa*, in 1897 it was renamed as a *F. magnolioides* for its obvious similarity in shape, consistency and colour of its leaves, to the *Magnolia grandiflora*, an American tree frequently planted in northern gardens. This new name creates a still ongoing confusion, which cancelling out the identity of a species, which has many reasons to have one of its own, even beyond the confines of plant science. Clarity is finally made by the botanists Fici and Raimondo, who, in 1996, declare that it was a well known species and that it had not awaited Palermo in order to be recognised and described: *Ficus macrophylla* subsp. *columnaris* to indicate the extraordinary way in which it grows, putting out aerial roots that then thrust themselves into the ground and buttress, like columns, its canopy. The tree, thanks to this, grows more in width than in height and “it is impossible to know from whence it comes and whither it goes”, said an Australian botanist. In 2001, a new taxonomical and nomenclatural revision

considers this taxon a type rather than a subspecies. Today, therefore, the international recognised name is *Ficus macrophylla* f. *columnaris*. Its particularity and botanical uniqueness have assured the ficus a place in European literature: it is on one of these that Robinson Crusoe builds his first tree house; the fantasy shapes of the ‘treehouses’ in the Forest of Pandora in the film *Avatar* are based on this tree and Emilio Salgari in ‘*The Mystery of the Black Jungle*’ notes how a single tree “forms a forest, supported by hundreds and hundreds of bizarre columns, under which the Brahmin priests place their idols”. The banyans—as they are called in the Orient, because under them the Hindu merchants (banjan), used to rest—are considered to be sacred trees.

Under a *Ficus religiosa*, Siddhartha reached illumination and became Buddha and Krishna rest is protected by the Banyan’s canopy. For the Hindus the *F. benghalensis* is sacred and its buttress roots represent immortality and the ficus that grows in Via Notarbartolo has a similar task, having become our sacred tree: it passes on to posterity the examples and memory of Giovanni Falcone, of Francesca Morvillo and their security escort.

VILLA TRABIA

51

Bauhinia forficata

The Park of Villa Trabia in the Terre Rosse, extending over just under 8 hectares, is part of the area of villas, realised outside the city walls in the late 18th century. Its story begins in 1756, when Don Paolo Spinelli transforms a 'casena rustica' or working structure devoted to farming into a large Villa with



garden. At his death in 1770, it passes to the Gaetani family, who annexes it to an estate already in their property. Vincenzo Ostinelli (who directed the Garden from 1882 to the beginning of the 20th century) writes *"that it was only a farming estate, for the most part not cultivated, with a lot of land covered in olives, Coriaria myrtifolia or Tanners Sumac and Prickly pear, with a small parcel covered with Citrus fruit and other Fruit trees... the land was planted with four large Pines, two groups of Cypress trees and "a maze created by Boxwood, no longer in existence"*. The 18th century layout is still visible between the villa, the principal fountain, the access path (Viale della Catena), the bridge with a belvedere all aligned along a central axis. This long and celebratory tree-lined entrance avenue, the *parterre* behind this, and the general symmetry in the design of the villa follow the French style, very fashionable amongst the Palermitan aristocracy in the 18th century. In 1814, Giuseppe Lanza Branciforte, Prince of Trabia, obtains the estate from the Prince of Campofranco in payment of a debt and continues to develop the gardens in the French style, creating geometrical *parterre* in the area in front of the Palazzo, up until 1867 when he redesigns everything with irregular flowerbeds and flanks the two alleys that lead from the Catena to the house with Oleanders and Robinia [Locusts]. These interventions signal a movement away from the linearity of the French style and from the monochrome monotony of the evergreens, (which together with the almost complete absence of flowers, indicates the desire to avoid the signs of the passing seasons or that of time) in the English style.

The Oleander, with its abundant summer flowering as well as the Robinia, whose



52

Ehretia tinifolia





flowers are just as overpowering, bring a touch of exoticism. This 'revolution of taste' occurs not just at Villa Trabia, but also in other Palermitan gardens, expressing itself as a change in style from Formalism to Romanticism. The transformation of Villa Trabia, under the supervision of Princess Sofia, is carried out by Antonio Clemente who will be head gardener until 1881 after having played the same role in Villa Tasca and after the great Vincenzo Ostinelli. The garden develops into a park full of exotic touches: groups of Evergreen conifers (Araucarie), Palm trees ("...*Phoenix dactylifera, leonensis e reclinata, Corypha australis e Latania borbonica...*" Ostinelli V.); a selection of Conifers and ornamental Ficus and Sundry Oak trees. Ostinelli writes that "*the estate... is completely transformed into a villa and enhanced with a selection of the most beautiful and rare plants, as well as with statues and benches. Heated glass containers were created for the cultivation of some of the rarest and most precious exotic plants from warmer climates; basins, lakes, grottoes, a tennis court were all added*". An alley of Date palms, two deep, was also created together with a glasshouse for exotic plants and another for Orchids.

Nowadays the garden is divided into two distinct parts by the bridge that crosses Via Mattarella. In the large half there is the porter's lodge, the 'casena', the *parterre* ('Flora'), the market garden and the two *glasshouses*. The style is what is known as 'gardenesque', on level land on which, rather as if they were a collection, trees and shrubs, mainly of an exotic nature, are exhibited. The background for these living sculptures is created by irregular-shaped flowerbeds surrounded by lawns bordered by barely visible terracotta tiles, low edging, often

53

Ficus macrophylla f. columnaris

54

Parachidendron pruinatum, a real rarity of the garden

flowered, crossed by winding alleyways. In the other, smaller half, the 'Viale della Catena' and the Belvedere cross the 'pirrera', a cave that at the end of the 19th century, was home to the Trabias' private zoo. From the alley, winding stone stairs lead down to a romantic wood, with desert shrubs



(*Xerophytes*), grottoes and Asiatic plants (*Sophora japonica*), the Japanese pagoda tree. The vegetation is extremely dense, the landscape incorporates all the natural changes in levels and the rocky outcrops of tuff [consolidated volcanic ash], with the aim of creating an atmosphere of adventure. The wood is transformed into a 'Romantic Garden' with the addition of changes in levels, statues and artificial ruins, grottoes or even a lake. The formalism of the *parterre* is softened, the alleys and flowerbeds rendered irregular with the exotic plants placed in the middle. Thus one of the most fascinating characteristics of Villa Trabia is reinforced, the coexistence between different landscape styles that is to be found in many of the 19th century gardens in Palermo, unique for this combination of diverse International styles. Nowadays, the plants that are of greatest botanical importance are spread around outside of the garden. There are two rare examples of the *Ehretia tinifolia*, at the end of Viale della Catena; the *Cocculus laurifolius*, once known as *Laurus trinervis*, for its similarity with the laurel bush and for its evergreen leaves with three main veins is also present; the *Lonicera fragrantissima*, a bush originating from China, cited in Ostinelli's great work; the singular *Grevillea robusta*, the *Ligustrum lucidum* stemming from Asia, but now endemic, that together with the Holm oak (*Quercus ilex*) and various Mediterranean buckthorns (*Rhamnus alaternus*), combine the exotic with the Mediterranean in one homogenous whole, because they are all perfectly integrated. And finally an ancient specimen of *Pinus roxburghii*, a tree that for its age and rarity in gardens, takes on an undoubted importance.



55
Pinus roxburghii,
detail of the pine cone

**TAKEN FROM THE STORY OF
 HISTORICAL GARDENS, FLORENCE 1981**

The historical garden, (gardens attached to houses, palazzi, villas; parks; green spaces in the historical centres of cities, etc) is a collection of different materials, designed by man, partly realised with living specimens, that is sited on (and modifies) an anthropic environment, a natural context. It is, because it is a man-made object, a work of art, and as such, a cultural asset, an architectural and environmental resource, belonging to the

entire community that makes use of it. The garden, on a level with any other kind of resource, is an unicum, limited, perishable, irrepeatable, it has its own process of development, its own history (birth, growth, mutation, decline), which reflects the society and the culture that designed, created, used it and which have related with it... Therefore it is recommended that:

The historic garden is not used in a way that could damage its fragile environment and that its structure and its original use is in no way altered.

VILLA MALFITANO

56
Yucca australis

The garden of Villa Malfitano was created during 1886, when Joseph 'Pip' Whitaker commissions Emil Kunzmann, director of the family villas in Palermo (Villa Sofia and Villa Sperlinga), to create a large park, which

would reflect the eclectic tastes of the new owners. The style is *gardenesque* [planting recognisable as an art] and unites Formal with Romantic landscapes. Near the villa there are formal beds, full of multicoloured flowers, whose rigid formality diminishes as it gets further away, until it disappears completely, in curvilinear movements that become naturalistic and picturesque as they distance themselves from the main building. It was a complicated garden, at the beginning looked after by a plethora of gardeners, and which nowadays is characterised by an extraordinary *Ficus macrophylla* f. *columnaris* (which has almost



no buttress roots), whose long branches touch the ground (there are two similar ones in Villa Trabia) and with species of trees that are unique for their rarity and dimensions. There is a *Yucca australis*, placed at the entrance from Via Dante, an extremely rare conifer, the *Auracaria rulei*, one of the very few specimens existing in Europe, the *Nolina stricta*, with the base formed like turtle shells and the *Nolina longifolia*, which has been heavily suberised [impregnated with suberin during the creation of corky tissue]. There is also a fernlike Zamia: *Dioon edule* a bluey green Cycad originating from Mexico, present for over 150 years in Italy.



57
Dioon edule

58
*The extraordinary
Ficus macrophylla f.
columnaris at Villa
Malfitano*









60

Nolina stricta

In the peripheral areas there is mediterranean woodland, composed of trees of diverse types and heights: from the eucalyptus with its red flowers, (*Eucalyptus sideroxyylon*), to the scented Sophoreae (*Sophora secundiflora*) and the Australian Sweet Pittosporum (*Pittosporum undulatum*). In the *parterre* there is an uncommon specimen of the Bird of Paradise flower, half way between the *Strelitzia reginae* and the *S. juncea*. The marvels of the garden continue inside

the Villa in the 'Summer Garden' with the flowered fresco by Ettore De Maria Bergler, the 'Winter Garden' with its collection of more than 150 orchids, and the Ornithological collection of more than 10,000 specimens, no longer existing because devolved to the National Belfast Museum in 1968. The villa and the garden remain in the family until the death of the last member, Delia, in 1971. Since then, it has belonged to a Foundation and has suffered mixed fortunes.

61

Nolina longifolia

VILLA TASCA

62

Araucaria columnaris

The earliest sources affirm that Villa Tasca was founded mid 16th century by Aloisio di Bologna, sited along an old road that led to Monreale; a *'palagio'* and a *'villa'*, not far from the Cuba Sottana and the Cuba Soprana. At the beginning of the following century it is a Renaissance style garden, embellished with statues and at the end of the 18th century, it



is transformed into a Romantic garden. In 1851, a few years later, in the diary kept by Giuseppe Lanza Branciforte, there are signs of an evolution in line with the dynamism of the garden's landscape and with the history, broader but not dissimilar to that of the Conca d'Oro: *"In the month of January, February, March and April, the poplar trees of the plain of Camastra, which belongs to me, were cut down and mulberry trees were planted instead, as well as Tanners Summac trees..."*.

It is the sign that Villa Camastra is also dedicating greater space to agriculture and that economically viable species are becoming more widespread. The Conca d'Oro starts to transform itself halfway through the century: the citrus fruit become an important part of the productive landscape of the estate that in the meantime, has been bought by Lucio Mastrogiovanni Tasca e Nicolosi, newly created Count of Almerita. Even though it is an 'English' garden, the flora is anything but British and the lawn was used as a background to show off plants as though they were rare and unusual beauties: exotic subtropical and tropical species that had the opportunity to grow better in Palermo than anywhere else in Europe. There are large and ancient specimens of Cycadaceae, the Sago Palm (*Cycas revoluta*), the endangered *Ceratozamia* species and the *Dioon edule*; a Norfolk Island pine *Araucaria heterophylla* and a variety of Palm trees.

In 1870, work started on the Romantic Garden, in the northwest corner of the irregular Garden, where the trees, together with the differences in levels, the sculptures and the *follies*, (miniature reproductions of real or imaginary classical ruins), combined to evoke in the visitor feelings of the Sublime. A lake full of swans is surrounded by a



63

Kniphofia rooperi,
grows near the main
entrance to the garden



64

Araucaria heterophylla, a female strobilus

luxuriant forest of Bamboo with small palms growing in the understory (*Chamaedorea oblongata* and the *Chamaedorea pochutlensis*). The canopy of a *Ficus macrophylla* f. *columnaris* overshadows half of it, whilst a proud New Caledonia pine (*Araucaria columnaris*) towers over the other bank. There are also various examples of the *Areaceae* family: the *Archontophoenix*

alexandrae from Australia, the *Ravaenea rivularis* from Madagascar, an ancient *Brahea armata*, and on either side of the entrance gate, inside the garden and at the end of the monumental alley bordered by Palms originating from the Canary Islands, (*Phoenix Canariensis*) there is a row of massive *Washingtonia filifera* and underneath with a carpet of red hot poker flowers

(*Kniphofia rooperi*) underneath, an unusual South African monocotyledone. Certainly the *follies* that Count Tasca chose to ornament his garden are indicative of his values and his aspirations. On a small island bordered by cypress trees, in the Swan Lake, a marble column with a cross on the top, was a pointer to Rousseau's tomb, sited in the garden at Ermonville. Over an artificial grotto there is a circular temple dedicated to Ceres, the Roman goddess of Agriculture. A small waterfall runs out underneath the temple, symbolising the '*panacea aurea*', in reference to the concept that real art is alchemy. Opposite this group of follies in the other corner of the garden, there is another temple, surrounded by a semicircle of cypress trees and marked by a large domestic pine tree (*Pinus pinea*). Inside the temple was the bust of Count Lucio Mastrogiovanni Tasca and this majestic tree signalled his position as the family patriarch. In this part of the garden there is also a hillock dedicated to succulents and xerophytes where some specimens of *Yucca* (including the relatively rare *Yucca baccata*), such as *Opuntia*, *Nolina*, *Aloe*, *Agave* and *Dracaena* are all present, next to an upstanding grove of New Caledonian Pine (*Araucaria columnaris*). There are also *Phyllostachys nigra*, a splendid type of bamboo with dark black canes [culms], much appreciated by Count Lucio Tasca, the present-day owner; an ancient and rare *Cupressus cashmerian*; but also the *Cocculus laurifolius*, the *Brachychiton acerifolius* and the *Erythrina caffra* together with ancient perimeter lines of Holm oak (*Quercus ilex*), all ancient, healthy and flourishing specimens.

65
Phyllostachys nigra,
 detail of the culm
 [cane]



THE TREE-LINED AVENUES

In the 16th century, when the wars slackened off and the population grew, Palermo started to expand outside its defensive city walls. The countryside filled up with monasteries, rabbit hutches destined for aristocratic shoots, lookout towers and fortified

farmhouses, fruit orchards and vineyards and, for the first time, tree-lined avenues that lead from the city gates. They mark out the roads, beautify them, create shade, act as barriers to stop carriages and carts from running off the roads and protect from the

66
Erythrina caffra,
a bloom



dust that these create. The first road-side plantations documented are those planted by the magistrate Alemanno del Carretto in 1595, along the road leading to Monreale, proceeding from Via Toledo (nowadays Via Vittorio Emanuele), with the declared

intention, which failed, to influence the direction of the urban development. It was a double line of poplars, successively integrated in 1628 by plane trees, planted along “*a most convenient road*”, for what would nowadays be classified as for visual



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Jacaranda mimosifolia,
inflorescence

shielding “*rectifying the damage done by the sun during the summer months to the inhabitants of Monreale as they had the sun in their eyes going to work in Palermo every morning and similarly every evening when they returned*”. Other “*delightful tree-lined*

avenues... formed by verdant trees”, connected the city to its countryside.

Amongst the earliest avenues, attested to by maps and in the pages of historians and chroniclers, were those in 1601, consisting of poplars along the road to San Francesco





di Paola, (nowadays Via Pignatelli), which together with plane trees and elms, also line the roads that will later become Via Pindemonte and Via Lincoln. During the course of the 19th century some of the most important planting of avenues are realised: a double line of some 600 plane trees for Via Libertà, planted in 1892 and Coral [or

Flame] trees at the beginning of the 19th century (1817) along the Marina esplanade. The former lend a European splendour to the principal city road, whilst the latter, of South African origin, are exotically beautiful when their magnificent coral red flowers bloom in spring and offer a refreshing shade in the summer months. They are

68
Ligustrum lucidum,
inflorescences

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part of the *Erythrina caffra* family, their recognised name, which means something like ‘a surprising red colour’, even though in Palermo they were named by Agostino Todaro, director of the Botanical Gardens, *Erythrina viarum*. It would seem that a dense canopy and a sumptuous flowering are sufficient to promote an African woodland flower to the esplanades of Europe. After many years both the plantations show signs of the passing of time, mutilated by incorrect pruning and illness caused by modern city pollution. The avenues planted during the 20th century city expansion have not really fared any better. Originating from “*a seedbed of ornamental trees and shrubs, serving for the annual planting or replacing of gardens and public avenues*”—already functioning in 1865 in the Botanical Gardens—Sophoreae, Gleditsia, Robinia, Privet, Koelreuteria, the Amomyrtus meli, Syrian Hibiscus, Jacaranda and Brachychiton or Bottletree, flaunt a proliferation, even today, astonishing for its displayed diversity. Though the health of the single specimen is now cause for concern and it undermines the stability of all these plants with risks that should be preempted by their progressive substitution with young trees, more suited to the roads and pavements of the modern city.

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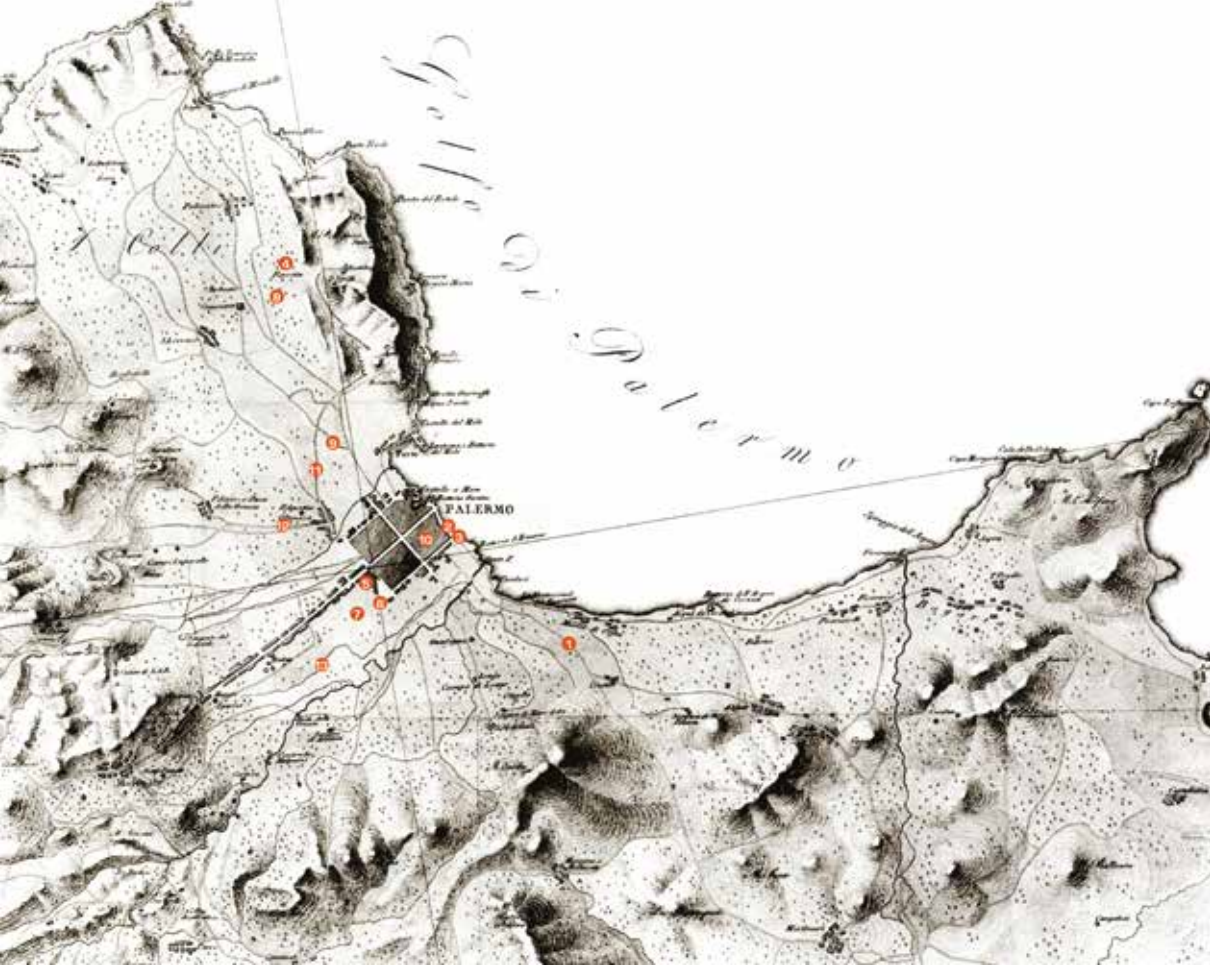
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- ① **Maredolce**
(Regione Siciliana) Via Giafar (turn off for the Port)
- ② **Villa Giulia**
(Comune di Palermo) Via Lincoln
- ③ **Orto Botanico** (Botanical Gardens)
(Università degli Studi di Palermo-Dip.to Scienze Botaniche) Via Lincoln
- ④ **Parco della Favorita**
(Comune di Palermo) Piazza Leoni
- ⑤ **Giardino del Palazzo dei Normanni**
(Assemblea Regionale Siciliana) Piazza Indipendenza
- ⑥ **Villa d'Orléans**
(Regione Siciliana) Corso Re Ruggero
- ⑦ **Fossa della Garofala**
(Università degli Studi di Palermo) Viale delle Scienze
- ⑧ **Parco del Principe di Castelnuovo**
(IPAB Istituto Principe di Castelnuovo) Viale del Fante n. 66
- ⑨ **Giardino Inglese**
(Comune di Palermo) Via Libertà
- ⑩ **Giardino Garibaldi**
(Comune di Palermo) Piazza Marina
- ⑪ **Villa Trabia**
(Comune di Palermo) Via A. Salinas n. 3
- ⑫ **Villa Malfitano**
(Fondazione Giuseppe Whitaker) Via Dante n. 167
- ⑬ **Villa Tasca**
(private property) Viale Regione Siciliana n. 442