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The very English gardens of the Riviera

The Riviera once attracted expats looking to leave strait-laced Victorian values behind. Many took the opportunity to loosen their corsets in the garden, too



Villa della Pergola, now a hotel, has been beautifully restored Photo: Villa della Pergola

By **Stephen Lacey**

7:00AM GMT 01 Nov 2014

3 Comments

It is a truth universally acknowledged that wherever the British go, they make gardens – often to the astonishment of the locals. The Riviera, invented largely by the British, has a great legacy of these gardens from its golden age – some, as I have been finding out, still pulsing with life, and others sadly moribund.

Our transformation of the rustic coastline with palms, mimosas and Italian cypresses began in earnest in the 19th century. Nice was the first Riviera resort to be established and colonised, its Promenade des Anglais built in the 1820s. In December 1834 Henry Brougham, a former Lord Chancellor, discovered the sleepy fishing village of Cannes, popularising it and "stupefying the Cannois" (as Charles Quest-Ritson recounts in his classic 1992 book *The English Garden Abroad*) by building a villa and creating immense lawns with turf imported from Britain by boat.

The lemon-growing region of Menton was next to be invaded, and with the expansion of the railway network, more British spilled over the present Italian border to Bordighera, San Remo and other Ligurian villages (until 1860, Nice and Menton were also Italian, part of the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia).

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It was not just the warmth and healthy winter climate that attracted the British, historian Alessandro Bartoli explained to me. The cost of living was lower than at home, something that appealed especially to those who had served in the outposts of empire and wanted still to enjoy the comforts of a colonial lifestyle, waited on by servants. To some the Riviera was simply an escape, a refuge from stifling Victorian morality for the divorced and the gay, as well as, as Somerset Maugham put it, "a sunny place for shady people". A few British also came specifically to indulge in exotic gardening.

Villa della Pergola, perched above the seaside town of Alassio between Genoa and the French border, has a number of these aspirations threaded through its story. Recently saved from destruction and development by its present owners, Antonio Ricci, a television producer, and his wife, Silvia – my hosts during this trip – it is now a splendid hotel, with its extensive terraced gardens restored and maintained to a very high standard (and open to non-residents all season by appointment: villadellapergola.com).



Val Rahmeh was created by a British doctor's daughter (ALAMY)

Pines, cypresses, and numerous species of palm break the horizontal lines of the walls, lawns and balustrades with lush greenery, while a massive *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*, accompanied by giant pots mounded high with *Nephrolepis* fern, shades the dining terrace in front of the villa. Farther down the slope are citrus and rose walks, lotus and water lily pools, steps edged in hydrangeas, and jungly groupings of giant strelitzia, tetrapanax and tree ferns. Old photographs were studied to assist in the replanting, but a stylish result was assured as the Riccis assigned the restoration to their friend, Italy's grand old man of garden design, Paolo Pejrone, who early in his career honed his craft working with two of the great names in 20th-century gardening, Russell Page and Roberto Burle Marx.

Agapanthus are a principal feature in June and July. More than 300 varieties are grown, making it one of the largest collections in Europe. For me, chunky (and in Britain slightly tender) *A. africanus* still holds the crown, and I liked the way Pejrone arranges them with a sprinkling of white through the blues or a sprinkling of blue through the whites so that the drifts don't look too formal and staccato. In April, it is the 30 varieties of wisteria cloaking the various pergolas that steal the show, with foliage tapestries of ferns, ruscus and glossy farfugium underneath them.

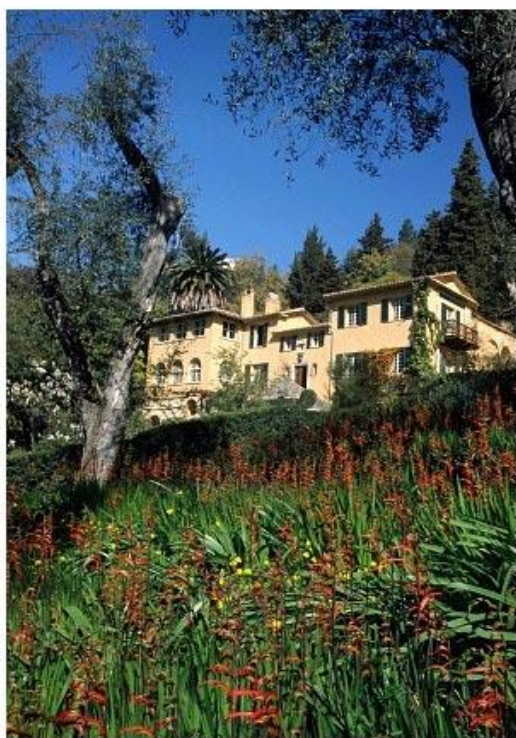
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A succession of British gardener-owners shaped this garden. The villa and terraces were built in the 1870s by a General William McMurdo, a veteran of Crimea and India's north-west frontier, with Lady McMurdo adding the first palms and cypresses. The next owner, during the first two decades of the 20th century, was Sir Walter Hamilton-Dalrymple, who weathered an early gay scandal to become a pillar of his North Berwick community, but who eventually divorced and emigrated here to find his freedom. An accomplished artist, he became a knowledgeable gardener too, making Villa della Pergola one of the best gardens in the region. And then, after his death, an even richer assortment of exotic plants was woven into it, for the villa was acquired by Daniel Hanbury, whose family were not only prominent local landowners, developers and businessmen, but also the most famous British gardeners on the Italian Riviera.

Anyone heading off on a garden jaunt to the Mediterranean for the first time is likely to have another Hanbury garden prominently on their list, La Mortola.

Images of the Hanbury palazzo and its tower silhouetted against the sea, and its domed gazebo fringed in agaves, feature in countless books and magazines, and by all accounts it was once a jewel. I went there for the first time about 25 years ago, and thought I would try my luck again, taking the train from Alassio west along the coast to Ventimiglia and a taxi up the hill. But, alas, and in spite of its glorious location and structural restoration, it still disappoints, with many areas bald and scruffy and its poky café still littered with cheap plastic seats.



Lawrence Johnston's home in Menton, Serre de la Madone (ALAIN KUBACSI/GAMMA)

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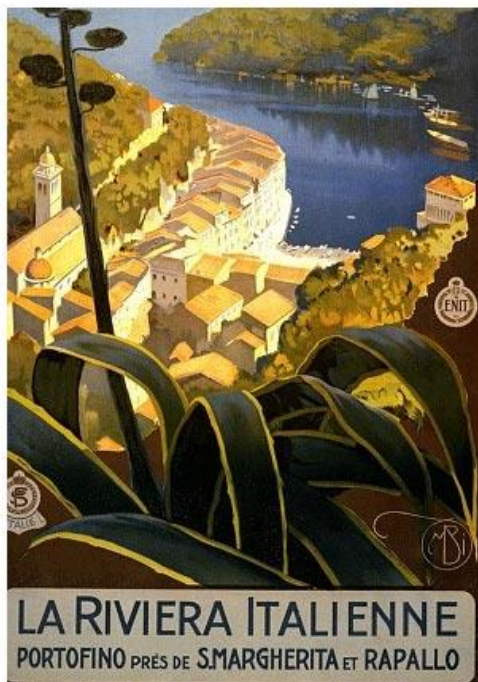
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The garden was created after 1867 by Daniel's father, Sir Thomas (who donated Wisley to the RHS, and was first drawn to the Riviera's dry climate to seek respite for his asthma), and Daniel's uncle, a distinguished botanist also called Daniel. As well as a place of beauty, it was conceived as a botanical garden to trial citrus and other exotics, especially those with medicinal and economic use, from around the world – the Hanburys had particularly strong trading links with China. The family kept ownership until 1960, when it was passed to the Italian state. It is now run by the University of Genoa, which no doubt has limited resources but could try harder.

More fun to visit is Boccanegra, which is within view across the bay. I did not realise this garden, created by the great English gardener and rosarian Ellen Willmott after 1905, still existed but last year I was introduced to its owners Ursula Piacenza and her nurseryman husband, Guido, at the Lucca flower show. At Boccanegra you find the gusto and passion lacking at La Mortola, but the mood is relaxed and homely. The modest house is plastered in climbing plants and sits right beside the winding road, and below it the ground plummets to the sea. There is a marvellous (but dodgy-looking) outdoor passenger lift to take swimmers down, but garden visitors (it is open by appointment: turismoinliguria.it) must wind their way down numerous narrow informal terraces between rare shrubs, succulents and bulbs to the sounds of an aviary full of lovebirds. Ursula says it is at its best in February.

Ellen Willmott is famous for bankrupting herself for her love of gardening – a lesson to us all. Although she inherited fabulous wealth, she ran vast gardens in Essex and Savoy and employed more than 100 gardeners.

Boccanegra was her third garden: having seen La Mortola she could not resist the planting opportunities. But, as Vivian Russell writes in her excellent book *Gardens of the Riviera*, it was her Waterloo. A year after purchasing it she was already borrowing money.



Vintage glamour: a travel poster from the Twenties (CORBIS)

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From Boccanegra I did the very short hop to the French border and Menton. Val Rahmeh is well worth seeing. Approached by a wonderful avenue of date palms, the dazzling ochre villa was built in 1925 by another British general, Sir Percy Radcliffe, and around it is a lavish garden of subtropical plants, developed by a later owner, a British doctor's daughter called Maybud Campbell. It is now in the hands of the National Museum of Natural History, and the maintenance and plantsmanship is outstanding.

But the Menton garden that I really wanted to see was Serre de la Madone, made by the creator of Hidcote, Lawrence Johnston. The presentation is not to Hidcote standards and much restoration is still to be done, but after a series of owners and a starvation of funds, it has now found security in the hands of the non-profit Conservatoire du Littoral, with a talented plantsman called Claude Antoniazzi as its head gardener. You approach up various shrubby terraces sporting plants such as ginger lilies, tender mahonias and oreopanax, and then there is the coup de theatre of a large water terrace and a soaring vista.

Johnston (who found the Menton climate ideal for his health – his lungs were damaged in the war), began the garden in 1924, 17 years after acquiring Hidcote. The house is more prominent in the design than at Hidcote, and although there is formality, the absence of hedged compartments allows for a more open garden. It has a lovely atmosphere.

Of course, Johnston was actually an American, but I think we can call him an honorary Briton, and so claim Serre de la Madone as part of Britain's extraordinary contribution to the Riviera in a particularly luscious era of garden-making.

There are still some places left on Boxwood Tours' trip to Gardens of the French Riviera (May 10-15 2015), hosted by Helen Yemm, which visits many of the gardens mentioned. For further information, call 01341 241717 or visit boxwoodtours.co.uk.