

4.6 = LOOKING AT MEDITERRANEAN GARDENS AS EVIDENCE OF HISTORIC AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

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The Mediterranean landscape has been strongly affected and shaped by human imprint from ancient times. Sicily, in particular, can be defined as the "core essence" of this landscape, because its strategic central position in the Mediterranean made it a crossroads of people and historical events. Results from such connection are clearly readable both in urban and rural settings, where the time sequence of human activities produced a great diversity of features and land assets. Gardens as planned places including both natural and man-made materials are good indicators of the man/land relations. As a matter of fact, gardens have the capability to give physical form to human experiences, memories, and ideas which reflect the awareness of current and past life, as well as the perception of surrounding environment and landscape. Mediterranean gardens in Sicily effectively reproduce the singular mixture of historical, social and cultural processes occurred over the time and clearly show layered signs of changing lifestyles and environmental contexts. In this respect, eastern Sicily offers an interesting case study since very different geographic layouts, bioclimatic conditions, socio-economic and cultural background discriminate these territories from the western part of the island. Particularly, the prevailing lack of large rural estates (*latifondi*) and the early partitioning of lands to smallholders, as well as the emergence and spread of a rural high bourgeoisie gave rise to a significant representation of garden models, often small sized, with original design, materials, and plant collections (1). Far from providing a full check of the existing garden diversity, a representative frame can be summarized by the following types.

— *Monastic gardens*, with a cloister inside and a fruit/vegetable garden outside the walls; an adjoining natural park, called *silva*, was often integrated part of church lands. Many of them have become public gardens after the ecclesiastical confiscations in 1866. Examples still occur in Piazza Armerina (now Giardino Garibaldi), in Catania (San Nicolò La Rena), Siracusa (Latomia of Capuchins) and Taormina (San Domenico), although deeply altered and rearranged in their plant scheme and composition (2, 3).

— *Country houses* of different relevance and size, typical of the rural Mediterranean landscape; firmly rooted in the agriculture productivity, they were farm estates mostly devoted to crop production and/or livestock breeding, while the ornamental garden, next to the main dwelling, was reserved to the private recreational use of the owner's family. Examples varied from big productive complexes, old centres of rural communities, like Villa Fegotto (Chiaromonte Gulfi, RG), Nelson's Duchy (Bronte, CT), Villa Zirilli (Milazzo, ME), to minor mansions with smaller plots of land and farming incomes, well represented both in the hyblaean and etnean countryside, e.g. Villa Gisana (Modica, RG), Villa Casalotto and Villa Previtiera (CT).

— *Holiday and residential villas* in the suburban or rural areas, common expression of a comfortable and wealthy lifestyle related to aristocracy and then to high middle class; gardens represented beautiful escape from the summer heat, but mainly they incorporated combinations of good social standing, reputation, influence, and honour of their owners. These are the most preserved and representative historic gardens, such as Villa Elvira del Principe Bonaccorsi (Milazzo, ME), Villa Falconara and Casa Cuseni (Taormina, ME), Villa Bellini and Villa Consoli Marano (CT), Villa Patti (Caltagirone, CT), Villa Reimann (SR), Donnafugata Castle and Villa Palmeri di Villalba (RG) (4).

— *Green promenades and tree pathwalks*, born as first types of public green spaces; they were designed to provide recreational opportunities for leisure, walking and gathering of citizens, both in main and small cities, and in time were enlarged to become typical public gardens, e.g. Villa Pacini (CT), Villa Belvedere (Acireale, CT), Giardino Ibleo (RG), Villa of Palazzolo Acreide (SR).

As usual, these main garden types can be further characterized following a temporal range from the 18th to the 20th century, and a spatial extent North-South of eastern Sicily (*Valdemone* and *Val di Noto*).

Regarding the time scale, gardens in E Sicily show style changes varying from the typical Italian design, to the romantic and eclectic forms, all sharing the common Mediterranean use of fruit trees, aromatic plants and palms as main botanical collections (5). Geographic gradient, instead, results in the use of different materials (stone, clayey, terracottas, wood), decorations and handcrafts, strictly related to the landscape and local customs, as well as in the plant composition depending on specific microclimate contexts, cultural trends and exchanges of garden owners or gardeners with botanical gardens, science community and plant collectors.

1) AA.VV. (2012) Mediterranean Gardens from Sicily to Malta, Morrone Ed., Siracusa

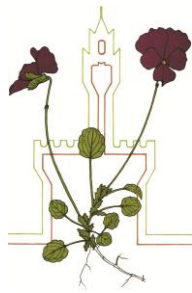
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