

In her late '50s, Violante Visconti di Modrone fell in love. Not with a man—that had happened long ago when she first met Prince Carlo Caracciolo—but with a place—an estate of 500 hectares 60km south of Rome in the hills of the Castelli Romani. She and Caracciolo had owned it for three months when they first visited, having bought it to help an acquaintance in financial need, so there was everything to discover as they turned off the main road onto a track and found themselves bumping through grassland grazed by white long-horn cattle, into the shade of woodlands thick with birdsong, to an outcrop of volcanic rock crowned by the ruins of a medieval castle and its surrounding village. Abandoned 800 years ago, the remains of stone walls and towers bristled with brambles and were blanketed by ivy—blurred to green oblivion. Only an 18th-century granary survived. Carlo and Violante were enchanted.

Restoration of the site began. Gae Aulenti, architect of the Musée d'Orsay, was engaged to convert the granary into a villa of elegant simplicity. Violante, who had already created more than one notable garden of her own, had a singular vision for what she wished to conjure from the 15 acres inside the walls of this ancient settlement. Inspired by nearby Ninfa, where Lauro Marchetti had made a famously romantic garden, also in the ruins of a village, Violante pictured a retreat of cool yet sensual abandon; scented, shady, lush with greenery, its flowers mostly white, and so informal in its design and planting that its boundaries might seem to melt into the landscape, just as the ruins of the castle and village that would form its framework seemed to be melting into the earth and rock from which they were constructed.

In 1994, three years into the restoration, Violante saw a garden created by the young Dan Pearson for the Chelsea Flower Show. She came back the next day and asked to be introduced. Two weeks later, he was making that same journey from Rome to Torrecchia, and their long collaboration began. “Violante

had been seriously ill and was very conscious of time passing,” he says. “She wanted the garden in a hurry.” Mature pomegranate trees were imported to line the entrance courtyard and huge camphor trees to shade the approach through the castle walls. Passionflowers and white roses had already been planted and had climbed more than 30 feet in a single season. More roses and wisteria were introduced, clambering after them over walls and up trees. A borehole was drilled for water, and a rill was created to bubble down a ravine. The edges of a pond were fringed with a ring of weeping cherries, and thousands of flowers were planted for their scent and beauty.

Violante died in 2000, but not before her vision had become a reality and not before the prince had married her in a final romantic gesture in the garden she had made for them both. The trees settled and thrived, the roses rambled, the wisterias climbed, and plants found their natural homes, mosses and ferns in shady corners, poppies, larkspur, and clary sage self-seeding inside sheltering walls, the prolific white stars of erigeron pushing through gaps in paving and softening the edges of steps and walls, the spikes of white foxgloves piercing drifts of sweet nicotiana, and in spring and early summer roses cascading, heavy with fragrant petals, and the long, soft tresses of white Japanese wisteria dripping low to brush passing cheeks. Every grassy path leads to a bench, a view, a dappled corner. “It’s a garden of moods and emotions,” says Dan Pearson, “there is always a particular place and moment there when I stop and prickles go right up the back of my neck.”

Since Carlo’s death in 2008, Torrecchia has been under the careful stewardship of his son Carlo Revelli. Dan Pearson has returned to work on incorporating an old chapel into the design. “There is a wonderful gardener called Angelo Mariani,” he says, “who has been working there from the beginning. Gardens are fragile—their spirit can easily be crushed—but Angelo understands and remembers what Violante wanted, and he keeps that spirit alive.”

# *Falling in Love Again*

The Gardens of Torrecchia Vecchia

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