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Contributions to the study of the historical gardens of Sicily. The garden of Villa Filangeri in Santa Flavia (Palermo)

Abstract

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The Villa Filangeri in Santa Flavia is among the most remarkable historical residences in the plane between Bagheria and Santa Flavia, south of Palermo. Built in 1742, in the last decades its garden has gradually lost its original richness and elegance. Presently its general structure is not still in good condition, and the plant heritage appears significantly varied and impoverished with respect to its original composition. Therefore, in the absence of recent surveys, the inventory of the present ornamental plant heritage was carried out. This, in order of adding new data to the ornamental flora of Sicilian parks and gardens and of giving a contribution to the possible restoration for public and cultural purposes.

Key words: ornamental plants, heritage, inventory, restoration.

Introduction

The city of Palermo with its surroundings, lying in a well protected basin by a crown of reliefs and fed by ample water reserves, was the seat of rich agricultural crops and of gardens for which for its cultivated plant heritage it has been appreciated and valued by the dominations that have left you, more or less deep traces since the origins. Thus we can recognize the signs of the passage of the Carthaginians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Muslims, Normans and various other peoples who have followed it until today. All this also applies to the rest of Sicily but especially the areas in contact with Palermo itself.

In these places, starting from the XVII century, flourishing activities typical of the dominations that took place in Sicily have developed (introduction of citrus, rice, cotton, etc.) and, during the development, extended private properties with the relative residences which were real villas that were considered valuable expressions of wealth and power. Concentrated on the outskirts of the city of Palermo, they would gradually shape large sections of the growing urban fabric in which they would soon be incorporated. Today most of these villas have disappeared. Several others located between the urban centers of Bagheria and Santa Flavia, are more or less abandoned but still are the testimony of the

aforementioned splendours. Among them, here we just examine the garden of Villa Filangeri, one of the most important fate in the XVIII century.

The Sicilian garden between the 18th and 19th centuries

As we know, the culture of the informal garden spread in the nineteenth century. It includes various examples of English inspiration as well as the transformation of the garden into new romantic trends. Added to this is the entry of numerous exotic elements that impart to the ornamental heritage of the Sicilian coast the well-known tropical cosmopolitan character for which it stands out as an autonomous cultural unit even compared to the historic Italian garden. Furthermore, the Sicilian gardens that have developed as informal gardens are marked by a Masonic symbolism, just like the new English gardening theories (Lanza Tomasi 1974; Cazzato & Maresca 2006).

The garden of the Villa Filangeri

Along the path marked by the axis, leaving behind the winter garden, hidden by the imposing front overlooking the village of Santa Flavia, you will discover the garden, a reality that was once used exclusively by the Filangeri family (Figs. 1-3). Inscribed in a



Fig. 1. The prospectus of the villa. Today the building is the seat of the administration of Santa Flavia.



Fig. 2. The transversal path with two nineteenth century statues placed at the entrance. In the background the central fountain.



Fig. 3. The central fountain at the intersection of the main paths.

rectangular area of 8,500 m², almost flat, according to archive sources, the installation dates back to 1742, when Mastro Antonio Paladino and Mastro Antonio Sperandeo, led by Giuseppe Caccaminisi, worked on the enlargement of the villa, creating the wall of the back garden and the fountain in the middle of the octagonal space at the intersection of the two orthogonal avenues that cross the garden. The planimetric layout of the garden gives a not unusual image in the gardens of the contemporary villas in the territory (similar compositional schemes can be identified in the gardens of Villa Galletti-San Cataldo and in the now disappeared garden of Villa Butera, lying in Bagheria. However, both the Villa Filangeri and the Villa Butera plan are based on a doubled form, unlike that of Villa Galletti-San Cataldo which is more complex due to the presence of oblique avenues. The plant, originally from the eighteenth century, still legible, consists of a regular pattern, formed by two avenues, of which the longitudinal one is the continuation of the road axis in front of the villa and the other orthogonal to it, divides the parterre into four rectangular modules of 48 × 30 m. The axes, intersecting form an octagonal space that finds at its center a quadrangular lobed fountain, around which four stone seats are arranged in front of some recently built statues pedestals. Other statues, also of recent construction, can be found scattered in the garden without ever having been placed there. The enclosure consists of limestone walls that terminate in a semicircular exedra at the main axis. Another exedra is found at the transversal axis, which does not find its correspondent to the opposite extremity of the north-west axis. This leads to the hypothesis that a part of the garden has been renewed or sold. In the second half of the nineteenth century the plant was trans-



Fig. 4. The artificial hill surmounted by an iron pagoda-shaped gazebo and one of the accesses to the cave below.

formed, with the creation of flower beds and irregular paths, some of which mirrored with respect to the longitudinal axis that continues the road axis in front of the architectural complex along which the inhabited center developed. The nineteenth-century plant is a complete “romantic” landscape arrangement. It is probably the work of an amateur aware of the Anglo-Chinese models that interprets the taste of the landscape garden in a Mediterranean key. Of the previous geometric layout, the two orthogonal avenues, the fountain and the exedras were maintained, while other elements were introduced with the nineteenth century transformation. Among the subsequent additions we find the hill, slightly sloping, at the top of which is a characteristic Aspra stone bench, hidden among the rich tropical vegetation (Fig. 4). Remains of another bench the same as the one on the hill are located next to the characteristic artificial rock

“montagnola”, whose height reaches 6 meters from the base. Inside it develops an artificial cave of about 4 meters in diameter which is accessed by four entrances. The exterior of the relief is furrowed by paths that lead to the summit that ends in a pagoda-shaped iron gazebo. An irregularly shaped basin is home to aquatic animals; moreover, in the garden are scattered various structures for exotic animals.

The plant heritage

The florula, moderately diversified, is composed of 241 specific and infraspecific taxa, belonging to 237 species, 176 genera of 88 families of spermatophytes and one of pteridophytes. These are mainly exotic, in part already represented in the Sicilian ornamental flora at the time of the first planting of the garden. Many others plants were gradually planted later, even in recent times. The families represented by a greater number of specific ranks or lower taxa are *Arecaceae* with 9 taxa, *Agavaceae* with 7 taxa and *Fabaceae* with 6 taxa. The species occurring in the greatest number of specimens are *Aloe ×caesia*, *Aloe saponaria*, *Brachychiton populneus*, *Cercis siliquastrum*, *Chamaerops humilis*, *Chlorophytum comosum*, *Crassula ovata*, *Ficus microcarpa*, *Lantana camara*, *Nerium oleander*, *Olea europaea*, *Opuntia ficus-indica*, *Pelargonium ×hortorum*, *Phoenix canariensis*, *Pinus halepensis*, *Pittosporum tobira*, *Tecomaria capensis*, *Viburnum tinus*, *Washingtonia robusta*, and *Yucca elephantipes*. It should be noted that the current floristic composition does not correspond to the initial one; many specimens are lacking both for lack of replacement and for inadequate maintenance, as



Fig. 5. The specimen of *Rhus lancea* unique in the historic Sicilian gardens.

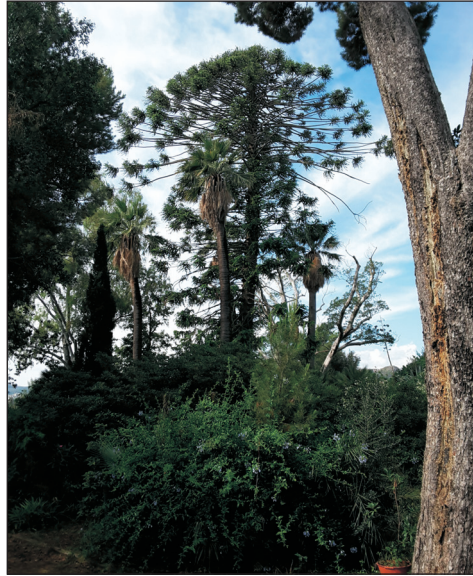


Fig. 6. The imposing *Araucaria bidwillii* in the central part of the garden.

shown in the flowerbeds various dead but not yet wasted strains. The marked deterioration is also evidenced by the presence of young specimens that, born from seed (*Cercis siliquastrum*, *Lantana camara*, *Olea europaea*, *Pittosporum tobira*, *Washingtonia robusta*, etc.), are common throughout the area, along with many other elements completely unrelated to the garden context. In a hypothesis of recovery and functional restoration, these elements should be removed. In the plant, however, there are various other elements that can be considered to represent real floristic emergencies and embellish the cultivated heritage. This is the case of a mature specimen of *Rhus lancea* (Fig. 5), native to South Africa, unique in the historic Sicilian (and perhaps even Italian) gardens (Ciccarello & al. 2015), as well as of a large specimen of *Araucaria bidwillii*, rare throughout western Sicily. Other floristic emergencies are: *Casuarina equisetifolia* and *Grevillea robusta* which, apart from the considerable size reached in the garden, are a distinctive sign that characterize the historic Sicilian gardens of the nineteenth century; *Washingtonia filifera* for the size and chronological context (early twentieth century) in which it was inserted. Also noteworthy are the two specimens of *Ficus microcarpa*, one at the entrance to the garden, the other near the rocky hill; the *Dracaena draco* specimen near the entrance to the garden; the two specimens of *Pinus halepensis*, in a central position near the fountain; on the gentle slope of the hill; the four specimens of *Washingtonia robusta*, arranged around the *Araucaria bidwillii* (Fig. 6), *Rhus lancea*, *Agave sisalana*, *Schinus molle*, *Arbutus unedo*, and *Spartium Junceum* characterize the slope of the artificial hill.

Below is the complete list of specific and infraspecific taxa detected in the garden object of our study. In it, the generic, specific and infraspecific taxa are arranged in alphabetical order. Nomenclature is according to Mazzola & Di Martino (1996).

The plant list

ACANTHACEAE

Justicia adhatoda L.
Thunbergia coccinea Wall.

ACERACEAE

Acer negundo L.

ADIANTACEAE

Adiantum capillus-veneris L.

AGAVACEAE

Agave americana L.
Agave americana var. *marginata* Trel.
Agave attenuata Salm-Dyck.
Agave ferox C. Koch
Agave sisalana Perrine
Cordyline australis (G. Forst.) Endl.
Yucca elephantipes Regel
Yucca aloifolia L.
Yucca aloifolia L. 'Tricolor'
Yucca gloriosa L.

AIZOACEAE

Aptenia cordifolia (L. f.) Schwantes
Carpobrotus acinaciformis (L.) Bolus
Carpobrotus edulis (L.) N.E.Br.
Drosanthemum floribundum (Haw.) Schwantes
Lampranthus sp.

ALOACEAE

Aloe arborescens Mill.
Aloe arborescens var. *frutescens* (Salm.-Dyck)
Link
Aloe ×caesia Salm-Dyck
Aloe ciliaris Haw.
Aloe lastii Baker
Aloe saponaria (W. T. Aiton) Haw.

AMARYLLIDACEAE

Amaryllis belladonna L.
Clivia miniata Reg.

Crinum sp.

Narcissus jonquilla L.
Narcissus tazetta L.

ANACARDIACEAE

Schinus molle L.

ANTHERICACEAE

Chlorophytum comosum (Thumb.) Jacques

APOCYNACEAE

Catharanthus roseus G. Don
Mandevilla sanderi (Hemsl.) Woodson
Nerium oleander L.
Plumeria rubra L. s. l.
Thevetia peruviana (Pers.) Schum.
Trachelospermum jasminoides (Lindl.) Lem.
Vinca major L.
Vinca major L. 'Variegata'

ARACEAE

Alocasia macrorrhiza (L.) G. Don
Colocasia esculenta (L.) Schott
Monstera deliciosa Liebm.
Zantedeschia aethiopica (L.) Spreng.

ARALIACEAE

Hedera canariensis Willd.
Hedera helix L.
Fatsia japonica (Thumb.) Decne.
Meryta denhamii Seem.
Oreopanax dactylifolium hort.
Tetrapanax papyrifer (Hook.) K. Koch

ARAUCARIACEAE

Araucaria bidwillii Hook.

ARECACEAE

Chamaedorea elegans Mart.
Chamaerops humilis L.
Livistona australis (R.Br.) Mart.

Phoenix canariensis Chabaud
Phoenix dactylifera L.
Syagrus romanzoffianum (Cham.) Glassman
Washingtonia filifera (Linden) H. Wendl.
Washingtonia robusta H. Wendl.

ASCLEPIADACEAE

Araujia sericofera Brot.
Asclepias fruticosa L.

ASPARAGACEAE

Asparagus asparagoides (L.) Druce
Asparagus densiflorus (Kunth) Jessop
Asparagus falcatus L.
Asparagus setaceus (Kunth) Jessop

ASTERACEAE

Argyranthemum frutescens (L.) Sch. Bip
Barlettina sordida (Less.) R. King & H. Rob.
Dahlia ×hortensis Guillaumin
Farfugium japonicum (L.) Kitan.
 ‘Aureomaculatum’
Santolina chamaecyparissus L.
Senecio cineraria DC.
Senecio angulatus Otto
Senecio petasitis DC.

BIGNONIACEAE

Campsis grandiflora (Thumb.) Schum.
Campsis radicans Fuss.
Distictis buccinatoria (DC.) A. Gentry
Jacaranda mimosifolia D. Don
Macfadyena unguis-cati (L.) Gentry
Tecoma stans (L.) Humb, Bonpl. & Kunth
Tecomaria capensis (Thumb.) Spach

BOMBACACEAE

Chorisia speciosa A. St. Hil.

BORAGINACEAE

Heliotropium arborescens L.

BRASSICACEAE

Matthiola incana (L.) R. Br.

BUDDLEJACEAE

Buddleja davidii Franch.

BUXACEAE

Buxus sempervirens L.

CACTACEAE

Cereus jamacaru Dc.
Hylocereus undatus (Haw.) Britton & Rose
Myrtillocactus geometrizans (Pfeiff.) Console
Opuntia dillenii Haw.
Opuntia ficus-indica (L.) Mill.
Opuntia maxima Mill.
Opuntia microdasys (Lehm.) Pfeiff.
Opuntia monacantha (Willd.) Haw.
Opuntia subulata (Muehlenpf.) Engelm.

CANNACEAE

Canna indica L. s. l.

CAPRIFOLIACEAE

Lonicera japonica Thumb.
Viburnum tinus L.

CASUARINACEAE

Casuarina equisetifolia Forst. & Forst.

CELASTRACEAE

Euonymus japonica L.

CONVALLARIACEAE

Aspidistra elatior Blume

CONVOLVULACEAE

Ipomoea indica (Burm.) Merr.

CRASSULACEAE

Aeonium arboreum (L.) Webb & Berthel.
 ‘Atropurpureum’
Aeonium arboreum (L.) Webb & Berthel.
 ‘Holo-chrysum’
Aeonium decorum Webb ex Bolle
Cotyledon orbiculata L.
Crassula arborescens (Mill.) Willd.
Crassula ovata (Mill.) Druce
Graptopetalum paraguayense (N.E.Br) Walter

CUPRESSACEAE

Chamaecyparis lawsoniana (Murray) Parl.
 ×*Cupressocyparis leylandii* (Dallim. & A.B.
 Jacks.) Dallim.
Cupressus arizonica Greene

Cupressus macrocarpa Gordon
Cupressus sempervirens L.
Platycladus orientalis (L.f.) Franco
Tetraclinis articulata (Vahl) Mast.

CYCADACEAE

Cycas revoluta Thunb.

CYPERACEAE

Cyperus alternifolius L.
Cyperus papyrus L.

DRACAENACEAE

Dracaena draco L.
Nolina recurvata (Lem.) Hemsl.

EBENACEAE

Diospyros lotus L.

EUPHORBIACEAE

Euphorbia candelabrum Kotschy
Euphorbia milii Des Moul.
Euphorbia pulcherrima Klotszsch
Euphorbia ramipressa Croizat
Euphorbia tirucalli L.
Euphorbia triangularis Desf.

FAGACEAE

Quercus ilex L.

GERANIACEAE

Pelargonium capitatum Sol.
Pelargonium peltatum (L.) L'Hér.
Pelargonium × domesticum (L.) L. H. Bailey
Pelargonium × hortorum L. H. Bailey
Pelargonium zonale (L.) L'Hér.

HYDRANGEACEAE

Hydrangea macrophylla (Thumb.) Ser.

HIPPOCASTANACEAE

Aesculus hippocastanus L.

IRIDACEAE

Antholyza aethopica L.
Iris germanica L.

LAMIACEAE

Lavandula angustifolia L.

Rosmarinus officinalis L.
Salvia officinalis L.

LAURACEAE

Laurus nobilis L.
Persea gratissima Mill.

FABACEAE

Acacia cyanophylla Lindl.
Acacia dealbata Link
Acacia karoo Hayne
Albizia julibrissin Benth.
Bauhinia diphylla Buch.-Ham.
Caesalpinia gilliesii (Hook.) Benth.
Ceratonia siliqua L.
Cercis siliquastrum L.
Parkinsonia aculeata L.
Robinia pseudoacacia L.
Sesbania punicea (Cav.) Benth.
Sophora japonica L.
Spartium junceum L.
Wisteria floribunda (Willd.) DC.
Wisteria sinensis Sweet.

LILIACEAE

Agapanthus africanus (L.) Hoffm.

LYTHRACEAE

Lagerstroemia indica L.

MAGNOLIACEAE

Magnolia grandiflora L.

MALVACEAE

Abutilon × hybridum (Lam.) Sweet
Alcea rosea L.
Hibiscus mutabilis L.
Hibiscus rosa-sinensis L.
Lagunaria patersonii (Anderss.) G. Don.

MELIACEAE

Melia azedarach L.

MORACEAE

Ficus carica L.
Ficus elastica Roxb. ex Hornem. 'decora'
Ficus macrophylla Desf.
Ficus microcarpa L.

*MUSACEAE**Musa* ×*paradisica* L.*MYOPORACEAE**Myoporum tenuifolium* G.Forst.*MYRTACEAE**Callistemon citrinus* (Curtis) Skeels*Eucalyptus camaldulensis* Dehnh.*Myrtus communis* L.*NEPHROLEPIDACEAE**Nephrolepis cordifolia* (L.) Presl*NYCYAGINACEAE**Bougainvillea glabra* Choisy*OLEACEAE**Jasminum azoricum* L.*Jasminum fruticans* L.*Jasminum officinale* L. f. ‘Grandiflorum’*Jasminum nudiflorum* Lindl.*Jasminum sambac* (L.) Aiton*Ligustrum lucidum* W. T. Aiton*Olea europaea* L. var. *europaea**PASSIFLORACEAE**Passiflora coerulea* L.*PHORMIACEAE**Phormium tenax* Forst & Forst*PINACEAE**Abies cephalonica* Loud.*Pinus canariensis* Sweet*PITTOSPORACEAE**Pittosporum tobira* (Thumb.) Aiton f.*PLATANACEAE**Platanus* ×*hybrida* Brot.*PLUMBAGINACEAE**Plumbago auriculata* Lam.*POACEAE**Cortaderia selloana* (Schult. & Schult. f.)

Asch. & Graebn.

Phyllostachys nigra Munro*POLYGONACEAE**Polygonum aubertii* L. Henry*PORTULACACEAE**Portulacaria afra* Jacq.*PROTEACEAE**Grevillea robusta* R. Br.*PUNICACEAE**Punica granatum* L.*RHAMNACEAE**Rhamnus alaternus* L.*ROSACEAE**Cydonia oblonga* Mill.*Eriobotrya japonica* (Thumb.) Lindl.*Prunus armeniaca* L.*Prunus cerasifera* Ehrh. ‘Pissardii’*Prunus dulcis* (Mill.) D.A. Web*Prunus persica* (L.) Batsch.*Pyracantha coccinea* Roem.*Spiraea* ×*vanhouttei* Zabel*Rosa banksiae* Ait.*RUSCACEAE**Ruscus hypophyllum* L.*RUTACEAE**Citrus aurantium* L.*Citrus deliciosa* Ten.*Citrus* ×*paradisi* Macfad.*Citrus limon* (L.) Burm.*Citrus sinensis* (L.) Osbeck*Fortunella margarita* (Lourr.) Swingle*Murraya paniculata* (L.) Jack*SALICACEAE**Populus alba* L.*Populus* ×*canadensis* Moench*Salix babilonica* L.*SAPINDACEAE**Cardiospermum halicacabum* L.*Koelreuteria paniculata* Laxm.*SAXIFRAGACEAE**Bergenia crassifolia* (L.) Fritsch

Philadelphus coronarius L.

SCROPHULARIACEAE

Paulownia tomentosa (Thunb.) Steud.

Russelia equisetiformis Schldl & Cham.

SIMAROUBACEAE

Ailanthus altissima (Mill.) Swingle

SOLANACEAE

Brugmansia suaveolens (Willd.) Bercht. & C. Presl

Solandra maxima (Sessé & Moc) P. Green

Solanum capsicanstrum Link

Solanum wendlandii Hook. f.

STERCULIACEAE

Brachychiton populneus (Schott & Endl.) R. Br

STRELITZIACEAE

Strelitzia alba (L.) Skeels.

Strelitzia reginae Banks

TAMARICACEAE

Tamarix africana Poir.

Tamarix parviflora DC

ULMACEAE

Celtis australis L.

Ulmus aff. *canescens* Melville

VERBENACEAE

Aloysia triphylla (L'Hér) Brit.

Duranta plumieri Jacq.

Lantana camara L.

VITACEAE

Parthenocissus quinquefolia Planch.

Vitis vinifera L.

ZINGIBERACEAE

Alpinia zerumbet (Pers.) B.L. Burt. & Rosemary M. Sm.

Final considerations

The florula recorded in the garden of Villa Filangeri reflects, with few exceptions, that found in the nineteenth-century gardens of the adjacent city of Palermo.

In conclusion, the historical garden of Santa Flavia, although relatively diversified, does not present particular elements related to the ornamental floristic heritage with the exceptions of *Rhus lancea* and *Araucaria bidwillii*. Such specimens could be usefully employed in the hypothesis of a functional and landscape recovery and requalification.

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