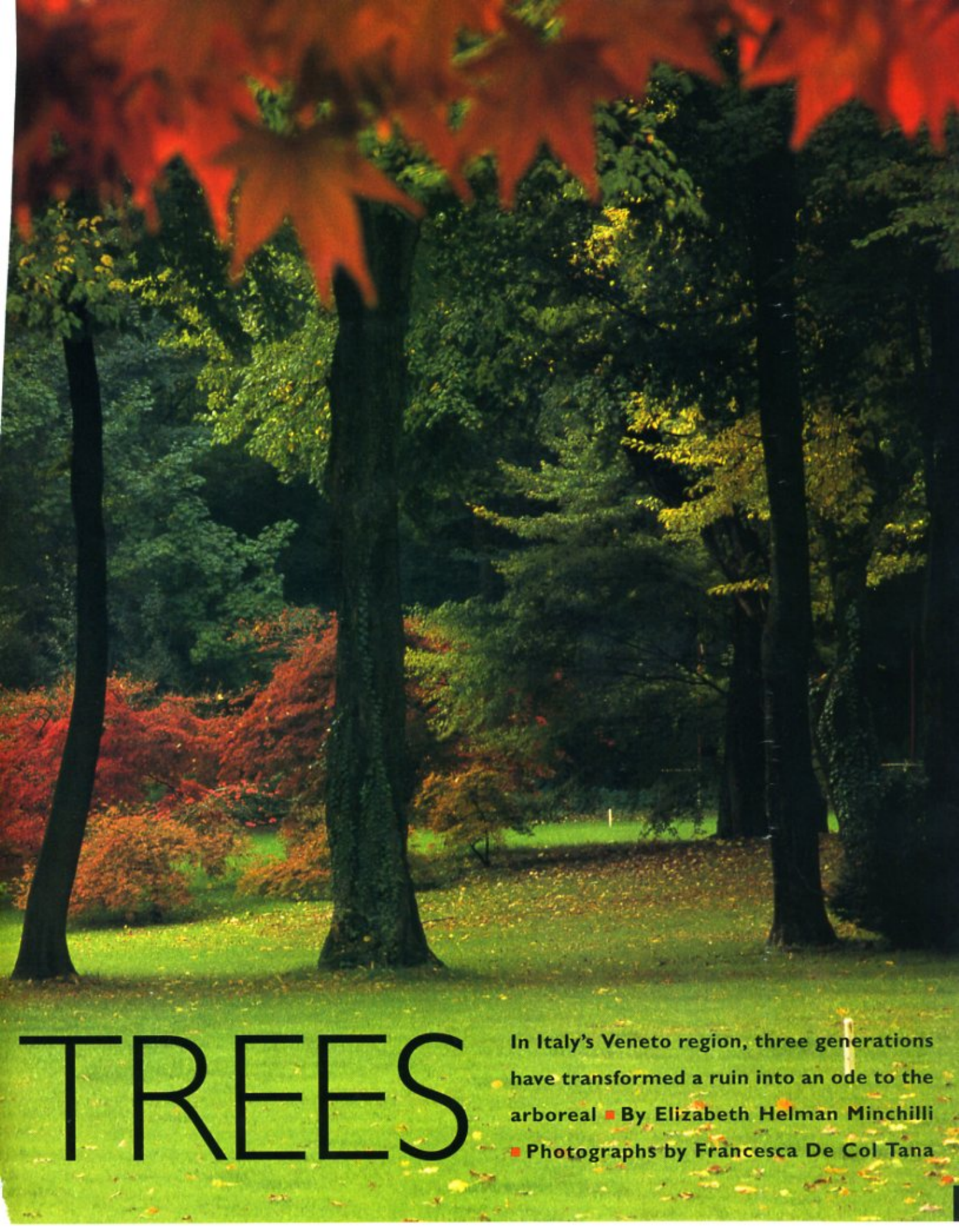




BRANCHING OUT Japanese maples artfully line either side of the Viale dei Pini, or Pine Allée, of Parco Sigurtà. They come into their own in the fall, when other Italian gardens are dry and dreary.

FAMILY



TREES

In Italy's Veneto region, three generations have transformed a ruin into an ode to the arboreal ■ **By Elizabeth Helman Minchilli**
■ **Photographs by Francesca De Col Tana**



EMERALD MILES The centuries-old cypresses, left, that line a path have taken on a green tinge from lichens growing on their trunks. Below: A carved capital on a folly, in the Hermitage, one of two Carlo Sigurtà discovered on the property. Opposite: Giuseppe's beloved Japanese maples glow in the mist from the Mincio River.

Y

ou must be involved and care deeply. It is a bit like raising a child," says Giuseppe Sigurtà. The words are surprising only in that they are spoken by a young man who, at 31, is one of Italy's most eligible bachelors, a connoisseur of wine, and the proud owner of a brand-new red Ferrari. But what truly excites him is a new iris catalog and the possibilities it presents for his greatest love, the Parco Giardino Sigurtà, a sprawling 125 acres just outside Verona and near the beautiful Lake Garda.

This unique and magical garden is the extremely personal creation of three generations of the Sigurtà family. Carlo Sigurtà, Giuseppe's great-uncle, came upon the abandoned Villa Maffei nearly sixty years ago. He had already led an adventurous life, first serving in World War I and then heading off to Argentina in search of his fortune (having sold his watch to buy a ticket). But homesickness and ambition brought him back, and by happenstance he obtained the rights to distribute a new headache remedy. It turned out to be a success, and Carlo's fortune was made. In 1927 he founded Sigurtà Farmaceutici, which became one of the largest such companies in Italy.

But by 1941 the Second World War had erupted and fuel was in short supply, so Carlo headed to nearby Valeggio, known for its fine carriages, in search of a horse and trap to get him to work each

day. The proprietor of the carriage shop mentioned an abandoned villa, built in 1693 and designed in a neo-Palladian style by Vincenzo Pellesina, which Carlo passed on his test drive. The house had long since been abandoned, but Carlo, entranced, bought the property. He despaired, however, when he realized there was no water on the land. Then, quite by accident, Carlo discovered that ancient water rights gave him permission to siphon the nearby Mincio River, and his imagination went into overdrive.

His father, a typographer, had always encouraged him to become a painter, and now Carlo's artistic sensibilities came to the fore. He installed a vast underground irrigation system that turned the park's open areas into vibrant, emerald green expanses. He encouraged the centuries-old trees, including boxwoods, oaks, maples, and poplars, to grow, planted new woodlands, cleared hills and







PERIOD OF REFLECTION

A view from the Castelletto, or Small Castle, opposite, with one of the park's many man-made ponds. Left: A group of dwarf Japanese maples in their fall finery, offset by dark green shade. Below: Another pond, edged in coleus and ornamental grasses, with its bounty of water lilies.

WHEN VISITORS COMPLAINED THEY COULD LOOK BUT NOT TOUCH, CARLO SAID, "AT THE BALLET, YOU DON'T FONDLE THE BALLERINA, DO YOU?"

valleys of scrub, and built streams and ponds, always keeping his touch as light as possible.

The park eventually became the focus of the industrialist's life. In 1974 Carlo retired to dedicate himself to it full-time until his death, in 1982, working closely with Enzo, his sister's son and his sole heir, whom he had adopted. Now the garden is overseen by Enzo and his children Giuseppe and Magda. "Much as the garden has developed in nearly sixty years, my grandfather's original vision still forms the backbone," Giuseppe explains.

The park was designed as a private refuge, but in 1978 Carlo was finally persuaded to allow visitors onto the property. "His company hosted many conferences here. Nobel Prize winners like Alexander Fleming and Albert Sabin took every opportunity to visit," says Giuseppe. Over and over again Carlo would hear the refrain "You really should open the park to the public. It is too magnificent to keep hidden for us privileged few." So the paved roads that had been added gradually throughout the park were finally opened to cars. "The road was very expensive," Giuseppe admits. "My grandfather always complained that the work was so difficult that a liter of wine was consumed by the workers for each meter of road. Remember, we have thirty miles of road. That's quite a bit of wine!" Yet access solely by car proved too frustrating. When visitors complained they could look but not touch, Carlo replied defensively, "When you go to the ballet, you don't expect to fondle

the ballerina, do you?" (The latest ecological compromise is a ban on cars; visitors may now ride a 60-passenger tram, rent bicycles or electric scooters, or wander the grounds freely on foot.)

Given the fortuitous combination of time, money, and space, not to mention unlimited water and a seemingly unlimited passion for gardening, the family has been able to incorporate a bit of everything into the vast grounds. And Giuseppe seems up on every detail. In the Iris Allée, more than half a mile of straight road flanked by a virtual rainbow of irises and daylilies, he points out, "Unfortunately, the irises have begun to cross-pollinate, so I am going to have to replant them into bigger

Elizabeth Helman Minchilli has written Private Tuscany (Rizzoli) and the forthcoming A Home in Italy.





GOLDEN HOURS In autumn, the lawns as well as the maples, left, become a canvas of yellow, orange, and red. Below: A stone griffin, almost submerged in ivy, stands watch over a fountain. Opposite: Over the past fifty years some 42,000 ancient boxwoods have been sculpted into surreal presences.

ANGELO TOSONI, WHO CARVED THE BOXWOODS, COULDN'T AT FIRST UNDERSTAND TRIMMING TREES THAT PRODUCED NEITHER FRUIT NOR WOOD

groupings, separating them. I like having the contrasting colors next to one another." At the aquatic garden, full of rare water lilies and goldfish, he announces, "We are taking the goldfish out and replacing them with koi, whose colors will better match the shades of the water lilies." At the secluded L'Eremo, or Hermitage, within a shady evergreen wood, Mozart pours from the trees. "Yes," says Giuseppe. "We play classical music here, chosen by my grandfather, to emphasize the harmony he was trying to create in this corner."

The ancient boxwoods, which first caught Carlo's attention, remain one of the main attractions (a recent census put the number at more than 42,000—more than 400 of which are over 400 years old). The twisted, sinuous shapes of some of the older ones are the result of fifty years of creative pruning by Angelo Tosoni, who was initially hired to help dig the park's pools. Once the pools were finished, Tosoni despaired at losing such steady work. Carlo Sigurtà told him offhandedly, "Why don't you go trim those bushes? They look a bit messy." What at first seemed a folly (Tosoni couldn't understand trimming trees that produced neither fruit nor wood) became a passion, and Tosoni spent the rest of his life snipping them to such an extent that Henry Moore once called them "living sculptures." It now requires a team of gardeners to keep up Tosoni's designs.

Throughout the park are examples of Giuseppe's pet passion: Japanese maples. "The nursery where we get these trees complains that we are their worst customer," Giuseppe says and laughs. "People see our maples, then go to them to order the

same tree. The problem is that the colors are never as pure and vivid as at Sigurtà. Our microclimate is impossible to duplicate. The result is that they have many dissatisfied customers!" And while the park is the most popular during the spring and summer, "my favorite time," confesses Giuseppe, "is the autumn." It is then that his beloved maples are at their prime, their blindingly beautiful reds, yellows, and golds softened by the mists from the nearby river. And the boxwoods become surreal presences in the hazy morning fog. ■

For more about Parco Sigurtà, including travel information and visiting hours, turn to INFO, page 105.





INFO

Each issue, we compile an address book filled with the vitals on our favorite plant sources, organizations, events, shops, furnishings, and people. Prices are approximate and do not include shipping and handling.

COVER

Gazania 'Daybreak Red Stripe' is available from Parkseed in packets of 25 seeds for \$2.50 (800/845-3369).

DIRT

■ **Pages 19-32:** For FAQs and products containing **Dursban**, go to the EPA's website: www.epa.gov/pesticides/announcement6800.htm. To grow your



▲ **Mowing**, a production by GardenHouse Dance, brings new meaning to cuttin' a rug (page 22). For show times, call 404/870-0117.

own **bonsai potato**, order one on-line at www.bonsaipotato.com. Sweep Dreams **brooms** by Mariachi Imports (800/871-7495) cost approximately \$23/large, \$15/medium, \$11/whisk. If you're concerned about **vegetables**, keep up-to-date with nutritional guidelines and reports on the USDA's website: www.usda.gov. The Cook's Garden specializes in organic seeds for cooks and gardeners; call 800/457-9703 or visit www.cooks-garden.com to request a catalog. Alex Jack published his research in *Let Food Be Thy Medicine* (One Peaceful World Press, 1999; \$16); to order, call The Kushi Store at 800/645-8744. To learn more about **Garrett Eckbo**, read the biography by Marc Treib and Dorothee Imbert, *Garrett Eckbo: Modern Landscapes for Living* (University of California Press, 1997; \$40). Send **Name That Garden** entries to GARDEN DESIGN, 100 Avenue of the Americas,

New York, NY 10013; e-mail: gardendesign@worldpub.net; fax: 212/334-1260. Three winners will be drawn from correct entries. **Botanica**, by Tom Baril, can be ordered from the publisher, Arena Editions (505/986-9132), for \$75. Prepare your garden for allergy season with Thomas Leo Ogren's book **Allergy-Free Gardening** (Ten Speed Press, 2000; \$20); call 510/559-1600 or visit www.tenspeed.com. Wolfgang Laib's exhibition **Wolfgang Laib: A Retrospective** opens at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., on Oct. 26, 2000, and runs through Jan. 21, 2001. It then travels to four other U.S. cities before closing in Munich; for information, call 212/988-7700.

GROWING

■ **Pages 34-35:** Japanese persimmons *Diospyros kaki* 'Jiro' and 'Sheng' are available from Edible Landscaping (800/524-4156) in gallon pots for \$26. Sonoma Antique Apple Nursery (707/433-6420) sells 4- to 5-foot *Diospyros kaki* 'Hachiya' and 'Fuyu' trees for \$25 each. *Uncommon Fruits Worthy of Attention*, by Lee Reich, is out of print but now available on CD. You may e-mail any inquiries to springtown@netstep.net.

TRAVEL

PARCO GIARDINO SIGURTÀ, AND BEYOND

Verona, Vicenza, and Venice unfold with famed architecture, festivals, and country villas

Parco Giardino Sigurtà (011/39/045/6371033), pages 90-99, is located about eight miles outside Verona, a quick drive from the city by car or taxi. The gardens are open from March 5 through November every day from 9:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M. Admission is about \$8 for adults and \$5 for children ages 6 to 14. Verona, the near neighbor of Vicenza and the legendary Venice, all in the region known as the Veneto, has fame and attractions of its own. The city is built around a late-first-century Roman arena, the site of a renowned opera festival each summer. The tomb of Juliet (of the doomed lovers whom Shakespeare immortalized) is hidden in the cloisters of the Church of San Francesco al Corso, where the pair were married. The 12th-century Duomo, with its Romanesque apse, and the Basilica of San Zeno Maggiore, with a triptych by Mantegna, are other highlights. In Vicenza, it is the architecture of the great 16th-century architect Andrea Palladio that attracts most visitors. Eighteen of his country villas survive in the area, and his La Rotonda, with its perfect balance of landscape and building, is considered the ultimate realization of Renaissance ideals. Northwest of Parco Sigurtà is Lake Garda, one of the most beautiful lakes in Italy's Lake District and the source of the Mincio River, whose waters Carlo Sigurtà so artfully employed.



■ **Pages 36-37:** Many varieties of crape myrtle are available from Carroll Gardens (800/638-6334), including Lagerstroemia 'Sioux' (3-gallon pot \$38.85), L. 'Zuni', and two dwarf varieties, 'Victor' and 'Centennial' (all available in 2-gallon pots for \$28.85). Fantastic Plants (800/967-1912) carries 'Natchez' (6-foot plants are \$45) and 'Zuni' (3-foot plants are \$20). Fairweather Gardens (856/451-6261) carries 'Natchez' and 'Pokomoke'; 1- to 4-foot plants are about \$20.

■ **Page 38:** Native Seeds Search (520/622-5561; www.nativeseeds.org) sells bilobed, dipper, and other bottle gourd varieties in packets of 15 seeds for \$2. For birdhouse, club, and miniature bottle gourds and other single varieties (packets of 25-30 for \$2.50), call Seed Savers Exchange (www.seedsavers.org; 319/382-5990). To learn more about gourds, contact the Cucurbit Network (718/601-7329; www.cucurbit.org) or visit the American Gourd Society's website, www.americangourdsociety.org.

▲ The scented *Helleborus cyclophyllus* blooms from midwinter to early spring. Heronswood Nursery (www.héronswood.com; 360/297-4172) carries them for about \$12.

ROCKS FOR AGES

■ **Pages 43-44:** For stonemason Greg Harris, call GMH Stonemasonry at 703/660-2729. We recommend these books for learning more about how to build stone walls: *Stonework and Masonry*