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GARDENS

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PAOLO PEJRONE

The legendary Italian designer, who thinks of himself primarily as a gardener, on the importance of keeping gardens bold and simple, and working with nature in adapting to climate change

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Hailed, often, as Italy's greatest landscape architect and garden designer, Paolo Pejrone somehow remains just behind the curtain on the world stage of archi-gardener stars. Pejrone (pronounced pay-RO-neh) might not be a household name outside his own country, but he has created hundreds of gardens across the world, from France to Greece, and England to Saudi Arabia, around villas and castles, hotels and universities, banks, factories, and in piazzas and parks – there's a good chance you have been in one of his gardens, and not even realised it.

His clients and connections are countless and formidable, from the Agnelli family and Valentino to princes, presidents and Popes. If, beyond Italy's borders, Paolo is lesser-known than some of these international jetsetters, at home he stands alone as a cultural institution in his own right. "I've been found on a lot of school desks lately," he says, with a chuckle.

His own first gardening experiences were small steps taken as a four-year-old, growing up near Turin. "I have a memory of a hot, sunny day in the large vegetable garden at Valsalice, and a small patch of land carefully assigned to me by Giovanni, the gardener," he explains. "The soil was heavy clay, dry, cracked, and my job was important, biblical even: to quench its thirst. I remember the heavy watering can and the instructions – that the important thing was to be generous, but gentle."

He went on to study architecture before moving to London in 1969, where he studied and worked with the great designer Russell Page. In the 1970s, he moved to Rio de Janeiro to work as an intern for Roberto Burle Marx. "They were undoubtedly my greatest mentors," he says.

These formative years helped to crystallise his design ethos, which has changed little in the intervening decades. "Keep the plan bold and simple," he suggests. "Plants for great gardens are often counted by the thousands." The labyrinth of the Masino Castle, for example, which was re-created faithfully to mid 18th-century plans, is the second largest in Italy and includes more than 2,000 hornbeams. An allée on the same property is flanked by 7,000 bridalwreaths (*Spiraea x vanhouttei*).

Although he turns 82 this year, Paolo is not slowing down. His latest book, entitled *I dubbi del giardiniere: Storie di slow gardening* (*Doubts of a Gardener: Stories in Slow Gardening*), was published recently, and follows success with best-selling titles including *In the Garden You're Never Alone* and *A Real Gardener Never Gives Up*, which sold over 100,000 copies. Arguably the finest Pejrone title of all is *Chronicles from a Garden*, about his own private home and garden


Bramafam, which is situated high above the small town of Revello in Piedmont. Bramafam is literally his magic mountain, with terraced olive groves and ancient bastion – a perch overlooking the fertile plains of the Po River Valley, with a sunken vegetable garden, mountain stream, bamboo grove, laboratory, library, studio and 'nest'.

As gardeners age, it is inevitable that they think about designing gardens that will outlive them, and Paolo considers the future of not only his own garden or those he has designed, but the planet we all share. He reflects – sometimes with humour, other times with irony, but always with eloquence – on the futility of creating artificial environments that can only be maintained through constant watering, manicuring and heavy-handed use of chemicals. As a lover of Nature and her timing, he dislikes instant gardens and awkward architectural or botanical incongruities that get foisted upon the landscape. "We have to remember that a messy garden is still a beautiful garden," he says, "and straight lines are best when they give way to exuberance."

Paolo is incredulous when he sees show gardens that are not in shows, but in backyards, and admits to clenching his teeth when looking out over an extensive green lawn in Sardinia. "A summer lawn in Italy should be the colour of a golden schnitzel." The battle against nature and a changing climate is one that he personally refuses to fight, and his mantra is clear: *con, non contra* (with, not against). "Let's remember that plants are not our enemies, and trees are not poles," he says. "Gardens grow, and must be planned for accordingly."

The designer's curiosity and passion for plants and people have taken him from California to Monaco and

Morocco, but his next project is closer to home, for the Radicepura Garden Festival in Sicily. This biennial event, which is open now and until December, is located between an ever-smoking Mount Etna and the blue Ionian Sea, and features an intriguing line-up of international designers, architects, artists, writers and gardeners.

Another of his recent works, the Royal Gardens of Venice, opened in 2019, just a few steps from St Mark's Square. When you're tired of the crowds in the piazza, there's a quiet bench closer than you might think, in the shade of an antique pergola of cast iron. Sit for just a few minutes to enjoy the fine form of a large leaf of *Tetrapanax papyrifer* and the exuberant border of white hydrangeas and blue agapanthus blooms. This garden is just one of nearly a thousand subtly signed 'Paolo Pejrone'. 

USEFUL INFORMATION

Radicepura Garden Festival takes place near Catania in Sicily until 3 December. For more information visit radicepurafestival.com/en

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