

PAOLO PEJRONE: GLOBAL ITALIAN

INSPIRED AS MUCH BY PEASANT FARMERS AS BY THE GRAND MASTERS, THIS LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT SURELY DESERVES TO BE BETTER KNOWN OUTSIDE OF HIS OWN COUNTRY

Words Louisa Jones Photos Clive Nichols

Paolo Pejrone, landscape architect, dendrologist, plant collector, writer and hands-on gardener, has been Italy's leading garden designer in recent decades. He loves to tease. He claims to practise 'the oldest profession in the world' – no, he insists, not what you think, but the one described in the Bible: 'The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it' (Genesis 2:15). This means, he says, seriously this time: "Cultivate and care", an approach he learned when training with two great twentieth century gardeners: Russell Page and Roberto Burle Marx.

Paolo Pejrone was born in Turin in Piedmont in 1941. He first learned gardening from his grandmother and from a peasant couple who taught him to grow vegetables, raise chickens and propagate plants. When he was fourteen, this farm was sold to a nunnery: "One day in June I lost my world. I have spent all my life trying to rebuild it." At 16 he met the celebrated Italian designer Pietro Porcinai who encouraged him to graduate from the Polytechnical school of Turin. In 1970 he met Russell Page who sent him off to visit English gardens, [▶](#)





Left: Paolo Pejrone walking through his olive grove
This page: Argentario Garden in Italy



Left: The black swimming pool in Pejrone's Argentario Garden, Italy

Right: The black swimming pool at sunset

Above: Pejrone's simplicity in garden design is shown to beautiful effect here



bringing back notes and sketches for commentary. From there, Pejrone went on to Brazil to work with Burle Marx. Pejrone has since created gardens in Germany, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Austria, France and the UK. In Italy, after Page's death in 1984, he took on much of the latter's prestigious clientele, including the Agnelli family at the famous Villar Perosa. Pejrone also worked for years as an editor for *Condé Nast*, and still writes a weekly column for a major

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Italian newspaper, *La Stampa*. Italian vice president of the International Dendrology Society, he also was a founding member of the Italian landscape architects' association (AIAPP). He has never worked for Berlusconi.

Past masters

Of Russell Page, Pejrone still says: "I owe him everything. He was an autodidact with no degree, no pieces of paper, a follower of St. Francis, capable of impressive architecture, but also faithful to the modesty of violets".

It was Page who first taught him to respect "the dignity of plants"; also, never "to descend, in talking with municipal authorities,

to the level of mere square footage when discussing living things". When he first went to England, Pejrone was overwhelmed by the horticultural variety he discovered but Page advised: "Choose a few species you like and really get to know them, and only after, little by little, the rest. Begin with what you love." Pejrone has kept Page's notebooks and consults them often. But he feels that, in growing older, he has become closer to the ecologist Burle Marx. He too is a lover of wildlife and practises purely organic methods. Above all, Pejrone felt affinities with Marx in needing a garden of his own, which Page never had.

Experimenting at Bramafam

In 1994, above a village near Turin, Paolo Pejrone inherited Bramafam, a



Above: The black wooden walkways through woodland in Argentario Garden

semi-fortified domain at 400 meters altitude, almost five hectares of acid soil on a steep hillside. Its several distinct microclimates allow him to experiment with many different plantings – gunnera and bamboos in the gulch, Mediterranean holm oaks and cistus in a protected corner, exuberant collections flowering from February to July of arbutus, magnolias, azaleas, malus, philadelphus, cornus, hydrangeas, roses, underplanted with carpets of self-sowing groundcovers and bulbs.

Pejrone also maintains the idyllic Mediterranean union of flower and fruit, of productivity and beauty. He regularly puts fruit trees and often potagers in his clients' gardens. He loves equally, he says, the Davidia and the persimmon. Bramafam includes 30 varieties of figs.

This is now an old and settled garden, full of careful detail but not fussy or showy. It is, he claims, his laboratory, not a garden to visit, above all, it is a place to make plants happy.

Today its former terracing has disappeared under cascades of flowers but the structure permits crisscrossing points of view from several different levels, creating shifting light patterns according to season and time of day. Watering is restricted to recent additions, and only plants that adapt are allowed to remain. Climate change is clearly marking Bramafam: the ancient European oaks (*Quercus robur*) and formerly productive chestnuts that rise in the heart of the garden are suffering. But Pejrone has been able to experiment with olive trees on the upper terraces,

varieties imported from the colder heart of Tuscany.

Undiscovered gem

Why is a designer with such consummate mastery of both design and plants, not better known outside his own country? Perhaps it is because he is too protean. Each of his gardens has a distinct character but there is no immediately obvious Pejrone "signature". He has, as he puts it, no "ready-to-wear". On the west coast of Tuscany, for example, Pejrone has designed a garden which looks completely unlike his own. It also features shrubs and trees, but has very few flowers. Totally modern and minimalist, it is in no way abstract or conceptual; rather it is a distillation of the spirit of place. This sensitivity to

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➤ site is certainly one thing all his gardens have in common. Another is his rejection of “pompomage”—pretentious and superfluous decorative detail.

The designer and his clients do not always see eye-to-eye however: He remembers working with “Prince Aga Khan, whose passion was flower meadows. It made me mad. He wanted daffodils, blue Camassia, white carrots, and many, many poppies, that will only grow on loose soil. In practice, we had to redo this meadow almost every day. For five years I struggled to make a meadow that would last only one month.”

The lesson he draws from this? “Do not be afraid of simplicity in the garden.” He sometimes tries to educate his clients and is currently ripping up acres

of lawn in Sardinia to plant drought tolerant Mediterranean scrubland. But he protests against fashionable buzzwords. He recently wrote a column in *la Stampa* on “red geraniums” (as pelargoniums are often called) to challenge the native plant purists. The pelargonium, he claims, is today Italy’s most common, best loved species, considered by many a symbol of Italy, uniting north and south. But of course it comes from South Africa...

Finding a compromise

Garden historian Helena Atlee describes how cosmopolitanism in Italian gardens since the eighteenth century has hampered indigenous design work until very recently. The removal of landscape architecture from university curricula

Above: Pejrone’s designs are sensitive to their surroundings

obliged the young to train abroad and work for a cosmopolitan clientele. The weight of great historic models can still curtail innovation. Paolo Pejrone, the legitimate heir of Pinsent and Page, has worked out a good compromise. He may find himself on a beach in New Zealand with Russian émigré painter Peter Wolkonsky discovering tetragone in the wild, or waxing enthusiastic about Transylvanian allotments in medieval citadels, but his gardening grandmother is still his mentor. She advised him: “You may lose the tree, but do not lose the field.” So far, he is holding on pretty well.

Louisa Jones and Clive Nichols are preparing a book, Mediterranean Landscape Design, for Thames and Hudson. 🍷