

Tunnel vision

Villa La Foce gardens, Tuscany, Italy

Helena Attlee explores a 20th-century Tuscan masterpiece, where a fine garden and the landscape beyond it get equal billing

Photographs by Alex Ramsay

To reach La Foce, you must follow a narrow lane that plunges deep into the wooded Tuscan hills. The house is a serene, ochre-coloured building standing high above the vast, open landscape of the Val d'Orcia, its view stopped only by the rugged profile of Monte Amiata. The garden is a magnificent melange of English and Italian influences. The terraces, sturdy terracotta pots of lemons, wisteria-covered pergolas and neatly clipped parterres are all Italian, but the roses and herbaceous borders are quintessentially English. This delightful mixture was the result of close cooperation between Iris Origo, the Anglo-Irish author and historian famous for books such as *The Merchant of Prato* and *War in Val d'Orcia*, and an English architect, Cecil Pinsent. Countess Origo had grown up in Italy, but her gardening instincts were entirely English, and Pinsent worked in an Italianate style, taking his inspiration from the beautiful Baroque gardens of the 17th century.

La Foce has belonged to the Origo family ever since Count and Countess Origo bought the 3,000-acre estate in 1924. It was a desolate place in those days. The house stood on a bare, windswept ridge, the land was starved, erosion had stripped the soil from the high ground and most of the estate buildings were derelict. The couple were committed to transforming this bleak landscape and the lives of its inhabitants, and gradually restored the fertility of the soil, arrested the erosion and planted trees. Pinsent was commissioned to add a new wing to the Origos' 15th-century farmhouse. He helped them to improve life for the tenants on the estate by refurbishing houses and designing a new clinic and kindergarden.

Benedetta, Count and Countess Origo's daughter, links the beginning of work on the garden with an episode involving her mother's umbrella. 'My parents were trying to make a choice between replacing a lost umbrella and buying two new oxen for the farm,' she says. They couldn't afford to buy both the umbrella and the oxen, but, according to Benedetta, it was at about this time that Countess Origo received a telegram informing her that she was sole heir to a large estate. 'When he heard the news,' Benedetta recalls, 'my father said: "Oh well, we'll never have to have that conversation about oxen and umbrellas again."'

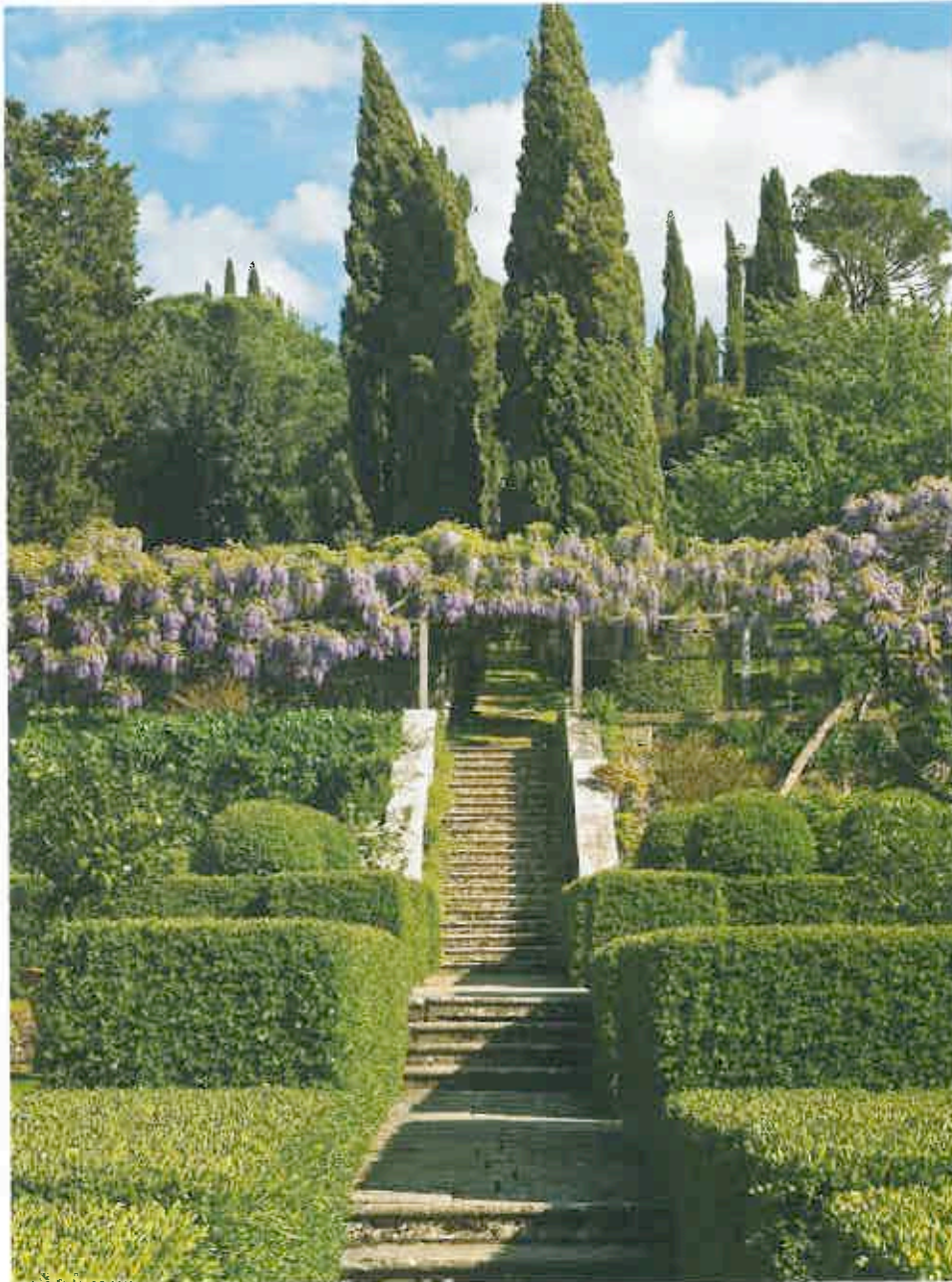
Count and Countess Origo commissioned Pinsent to start work on the garden in 1929. He built a high wall and planted bay hedges to enclose the area immediately behind the house. The garden that he made in this enclosed space contains little more than a fountain >

A view across the lemon garden to the 15th-century nucleus of Villa La Foce. In May, wisteria transforms Pinsent's pergola into a horizontal cascade of flowers









Previous pages The pergola frames glorious views over the rolling landscape of the Val d'Orcia, framed by the muscular stems, flowers and tender new leaves of the wisteria. *Above* The lemon garden is bisected by the path leading to the pergola

and a few box parterres, but it makes perfect sense to anyone who has lived in an exposed spot. It is a sheltered, domestic space, screened from the enormous, open vistas beyond and protected from the Tramontana wind that batters the hillside each winter.

Pinsent designed numerous gardens in Tuscany, but none is as successful as La Foce, where the garden evolved gradually, in a slow, meditative process that lasted for 15 years. The next phase of his design was the lemon garden, where he cut the gentle slope into a series of generous terraces that sit comfortably in the vast contours of the surrounding landscape. He furnished the lemon garden with some very Tuscan parterres in clipped box, and large terracotta pots of lemons that stand on stone plinths inside the box hedges. Once this structure was

in place, Countess Origo stepped in to complete the planting. She made beds around the perimeter of the lemon garden and filled them with peonies, irises and lilies. She covered the walls in climbing roses, jasmine and honeysuckle. The weather can be extreme in Tuscany, and she had much to learn.

Looking back at more than five decades of gardening, she wrote: 'Gradually, by experience and failure, I learned what would and would not stand our cold winters and the hot, dry summer winds. I gave up any attempt, in my borders, at growing delphiniums, lupins or phlox, as well as many other herbaceous plants; and I learned to put our lemon trees, plumbago and jasmine under shelter before the winter. But roses flourish in the heavy, clay soil, and so do peonies and lilies, while the dry hillside is where

lavender thrives, a blue sea in June.'

Go to La Foce in early May, and you'll find that the wisteria has burst into flower, transforming the long, sinuous pergola that Pinsent built above the lemon garden into a horizontal cascade of blossom. You will be drawn to it the moment you enter the garden. Dazzled by its beauty, you will blunder up the path in the lemon garden, almost oblivious to Pinsent's dense green architecture of topiary spheres, cubes and rectangles to either side of you, or the lizards scattering beneath your feet. Inside the pergola, the air will be loud with bees and steeped in lilac-tinted, scented light. There will be fallen petals underfoot, dried and baked crisp by wind and sun.

As the pergola turns at the base of the hill, the muscular stems of the wisteria frame views across the lower garden, which projects into the valley like the prow of a ship. This was the final element in Pinsent's design. A massive double staircase leads down to it, but the garden is made to be seen from above. It is entirely enclosed by cypresses and filled with wedge-shaped box parterres that taper towards a pool at its far end.

In the narrow space between the pergola and the hillside, Pinsent made a rose garden, where Countess Origo filled the stone-lined beds with standard roses in the 1950s; they thrived in the clay soil. After 60 years, however, the roses finally began to tire. Benedetta knew she couldn't plant new roses in the same soil without risk of rose sickness; if she chose to re-create her mother's planting scheme, she must strip the soil from the entire terrace. This would have been an enormous job, and, in consultation with Peter Curzon, an English landscape architect who works in a curatorial role at La Foce, she decided to replant the beds with perennials. He's pleased with this solution. 'We're treating La Foce as a real garden,' he says, 'and in a real garden, you garden for the present.' This is typical of the dynamic management style at La Foce. Countess Origo died in 1988, but her beautiful garden continues to evolve naturally, without undue nostalgia for the past.  Villa La Foce, 61, Strada della Vittoria, 53042 Chianciano Terme, Tuscany, Italy (00 39 57 86 91 01; www.lafoce.com). Garden open to visitors on Wednesday afternoons and Saturdays from the last Saturday in March to the last Saturday in October. Guided tours depart every hour, 10am-1pm and 3pm-7pm. Benedetta Origo and her sister Donata have recently made Villa La Foce available for rent. Helena Attlee's book, 'Italy's Private Gardens: An Inside View', will be published in October

Right Monte Amiata framed by the gateway that links the garden behind the house to the lemon garden

