

An Englishman's masterpiece

Writer Iris Origo longed for a verdant, pretty garden at La Foce in arid, windswept southern Tuscany. English landscape architect Cecil Pinsent made it a reality

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In brief

Name La Foce
What A superb garden designed between 1924-1939 by the English landscape architect Cecil Pinsent.
Where South of Siena in Tuscany, Italy
Size Roughly ten acres.
Soil Hard-baked clay, ameliorated by decades of work.
Climate Harsh, with very dry summers, cold winters and exposed to chilling winds.
Hardiness rating USDA 9.

The view south from the Fountain Garden, with its solid hedges of bay and a domed shelter, is framed by a curving pergola of wisteria that winds round the hill. Beyond is the semicircle of clipped cypresses, that marks the furthest point of the garden looking out on the distant dome of Monte Amiata.

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a Foce is the Italian garden made famous by the writer, Iris Origo, who came here as a young bride in 1924. It sits, not in the rich, lush part of Tuscany, but in the much harsher country called the Crete Senesi, south of Siena. It was, as she wrote, 'a land without mercy and without shade'.

In her classic memoir, *Images and Shadows*, Iris describes how she looked out over this dry, windy landscape and longed for 'green English fields and big trees – and most of all, for a pretty house and garden to come home to in the evening.' The man who made that dream come true was the English landscape architect Cecil Pinsent.

Iris had grown up with her Anglo-Irish mother at the Villa Medici in Florence. When she got engaged to Antonio Origo, an Italian marquis, her grandmother bought them the 3,500 acres of the La Foce estate, set on the high, arid windswept land between the river Ombrone and the Tiber near Montepulciano.

Pinsent had worked for several of the English and American expatriates in Florence, but La Foce is his masterpiece. He designed the house, originally no more than an inn, as well as the garden, and in the years he worked there (1924-1939) La Foce acquired a powerful spirit of place, with the gardens gathering round the house like a protecting carapace.

Work on the garden only became possible when a pipe was laid to bring water from an abundant spring six miles away and it continued in phases until war broke out in 1939. Cleverly, Pinsent civilised the 'alien, inhuman' landscape by framing it in particular viewpoints from the garden. The most famous is the zig-zag road that he laid out as a vista from the 'wild' garden behind

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The Lower Garden, made by Cecil Pinsent in 1939, was the final addition to La Foce. Double box hedges underline the geometric form and a cypress hedge protects the garden from the road below. Beyond is the famous zig-zag of cypresses ascending the hill, a view reproduced on a million postcards.

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**Cecil Pinsent
(1884-1963)
garden designer**

Cecil Pinsent had the good fortune to find a powerful patron while in his early twenties. American art historian Bernard Berenson asked him to make a garden at **Villa I Tatti** near Florence (itatti.harvard.edu). Berenson was one of the many expatriates who adopted Italy as their cultural home.

The Green Garden at I Tatti was Pinsent's first attempt to recreate a garden in the early Renaissance style. His work there, which was on an incredibly steep site, enabled him to explore the monumental, pared-down formality that later became his trademark.

The Berensons recommended Pinsent to Iris Origo's mother, Lady Sybil Cutting, who had arrived in Florence in 1910 as a young widow. Expatriates liked villas with Medici connections and Lady Sybil had one of the greats – **Villa Medici** itself. When Lady Sybil moved in, the top terrace was divided into three grass rectangles, punctuated with lemon trees and two immense paulownias. To the west of the house Pinsent made a *giardino segreto* with a simple geometric layout with plain box-edged beds around an elegant oval fountain.

During his years in Florence, Pinsent worked on eight major gardens, including **Villa Le Balze** in Fiesole, where he started work in 1913. He created both house and garden from scratch, working on a site that was even steeper and narrower than the garden at I Tatti. It is enchanting. In the Orange Garden, he used the traditional technique of *ciottolato* (a kind of mosaic) to make a grotto and four medallion busts.

At the **Villa Capponi**, Pinsent modernised the villa that had previously belonged to Lady Scott of Ancram, grandmother of the late Queen Mother. He got involved in the early 1930s and added a swimming pool screened by cypresses that had elegant dolphins spouting water at either end.



Construction of La Foce's double staircase



This image The fine staircase with its Nymphaeum (grotto) beneath that links the Lemon Garden with the Lower Garden.

Left from top

A view towards the house and the *fattoria* along the north-south axis that provides the backbone of the garden.

The belvedere sits at the end of the Lemon Garden with the wisteria covered pergola beyond.

Looking back across the garden from the far end of the Lower Garden. The double travertine staircase is a classic feature of Italian gardens, beautifully recreated at La Foce by Cecil Pinsent.

▷ the house. Lined with cypresses, this has now become one of the most photographed views in Tuscany, a picture you'll find on almost every postcard stand in Italy.

The formal garden at La Foce, now home to Iris's daughter, Benedetta, lies in a series of enclosures on the south side of the house accessed by a stone ramp, made from the beautiful travertine stone that is a speciality around Siena. Next to the house is the fountain garden where a high wall protects an elegant dolphin splashing in a boat-shaped bowl.

Tall pillars topped with vases (designed, as is the fountain, by Pinsent) mark the entrance to the Lemon Garden. This was in place by 1933, with huge lemon trees in terracotta pots set on stone plinths. Roses, honeysuckle and *Trachelospermum jasminoides* smother the retaining walls. It is, as Benedetta says, a "high maintenance garden, but also a garden to live in, a place to enjoy, as my mother enjoyed it."

One of the great moments at La Foce is the flowering of the wisteria on the curving 180m-long pergola that follows the contours of the hill, providing a vital spine in the design of the garden. From here you get dramatic views out over the landscape to Monte Amiata and beyond. The pergola, in place by 1938, is pierced by a stone staircase, leading to a lookout at the top of the hill.

Gradually the formal nature of the design with stone-edged flower beds alongside the pergola, drifts into a wilder woodland garden where the hillside is planted with Judas trees, flowering quinces, forsythia, pomegranates, shrub roses, and herbs such as lavender, thyme and rosemary. The path leads eventually to a small peaceful cemetery where the Origos buried their only son, Gianni, who died of meningitis when he was just seven years old.

Pinsent's final gift to La Foce was the wedge-shaped Magnolia Garden in 1939 – now without its magnolias and known as ▷

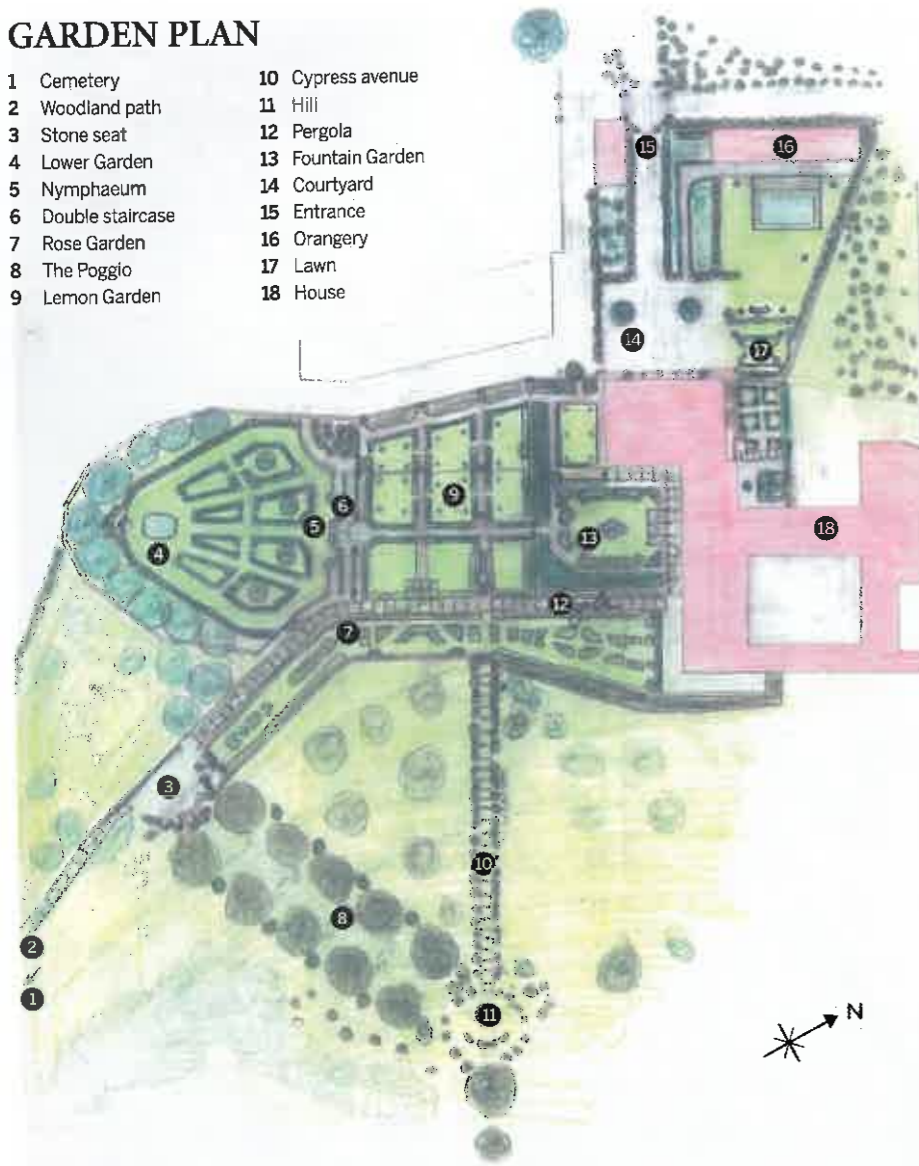


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The magnificent old *Wisteria sinensis* trained on the long pergola that curves from the house around a hill to end in a woodland path. The purple flowers coming into bloom is an annual highlight at La Foce. Below, the clipped box domes of the Lemon Garden.

GARDEN PLAN

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|--------------------|--------------------|
| 1 Cemetery | 10 Cypress avenue |
| 2 Woodland path | 11 Hill |
| 3 Stone seat | 12 Pergola |
| 4 Lower Garden | 13 Fountain Garden |
| 5 Nymphaeum | 14 Courtyard |
| 6 Double staircase | 15 Entrance |
| 7 Rose Garden | 16 Orangery |
| 8 The Poggio | 17 Lawn |
| 9 Lemon Garden | 18 House |



▷ the Lower Garden – that juts out at the end of the garden like the prow of a ship. A mighty double staircase, with a nymphaeum (grotto) underneath, links it to the Lemon Garden above. Once again, and rather brilliantly, Pinsent was able to adapt his design to the lie of the land, following the contours of a difficult site. There is a remarkable homogeneity to his work at La Foce, due to the fact that throughout the garden he used the same travertine stone, quarried in Rapolano. It helps, too, that he designed all the artefacts – seats, vases, urns, fountains – that decorate his expertly conceived creation.

La Foce is a place of staggering beauty but also of extraordinary peace. Here, you find the most perfect balance, the most acute synthesis of all that the English could give to Italy and all that they learned from it. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

La Foce, 53042 Chianciano Terme, Italy.
Tel +39 (0)578 69101
Email info@lafa.com
Website lafoce.com
Open Wednesday afternoons and every weekend from April to the beginning of November. There are guided tours and admission is €10. A music festival is held at La Foce every July (itslafa.org).

RECOMMENDED READING

- *Images and Shadows* by Iris Origo
A memoir of the writer's time at La Foce.
- *War in Val d'Orcia* by Iris Origo
A diary of the German occupation 1943-44.
- *La Foce: A Garden and Landscape in Tuscany* by Laurie Olin and Benedetta Origo
A tribute by Iris Origo's daughter Benedetta.

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The fountain garden with the wisteria pergola and cypress trees beyond. As well as laying out the garden at La Foce, Cecil Pinsent designed all the artefacts: fountains, urns, columns, stairs and seats.