

EARTH, FIRE, AIR AND WATER  
PRIVATE GARDENS OF EASTERN SICILY

FRIDAY 17 – WEDNESDAY 22 APRIL 2020 (6 DAYS)

LECTURER: RACHEL LAMB

£2350

- Visit Eastern Sicily's private gardens
- Four full days of visits hosted by the owners
- Tour led by renowned local gardener, Rachel Lamb
- Stunning botanical variety seen at the best time of the year to visit
- Private lunches hosted in a number of the gardens visited
- Historic family-run 4\* hotel located in the heart of Taormina



Canalicchio, Catania, *Stanze in Fiore*

## OVERVIEW

Antiquity's four 'elements' – earth, fire, air and water – have long been regarded as the mainstays of life's natural cycle. Nowhere in the Mediterranean can their contribution to horticulture be seen to such fecund and thrilling effect as on Sicily, particularly around the island's volcano, Mount Etna. Flowering trees, shrubs and plants, olives, vines and citrus groves have all thrived in Sicily's balmy climate, emerging from the mineral-laden, lava-based soil, formed from the earth's gift which has flowed down these slopes over millions of years.

In times past the luxuriant hunting parks of the Arab emirs and Norman kings, together with eighteenth century aristocratic pleasure gardens, all thrived close to the coastal cities of the island. Today, a number of remarkable modern private gardens, principally located on the eastern Ionian Sea side of Sicily, grow rare, exotic plants which thrive due to the fertile slopes and plains in sight of Mount Etna. Our gently-paced visit will explore a selection of these gardens, rich in botanical variety and diverse in layout, all created through the vision of the Sicilian owner-gardeners who will be our hosts.

We shall be based in Taormina, high on a promontory of Mount Tauro, spectacularly overlooking the Gulf of Naxos and Mount Etna. Ionian Greeks left the motherland and settled at Naxos in 734 BC, founding Sicily's first Greek colony. Dionysius I of Syracuse destroyed Naxos in 403 BC and its survivors founded Taormenion. Given the strategic importance of its location, Byzantine emperors, Arab emirs and later Spanish viceroys maintained the city. By the end of the nineteenth century Taormina was transformed into a bucolic colony for 'gentleman painters'. Artists and intellectuals flocked to its Greek remains, shady terraces and amazing views.

The tour will be led by **Rachel Lamb** who is an internationally known expert on the flora of Sicily. She is also the resident Head Gardener at Giardino di San Giuliano which we shall visit. Rachel will co-guide our group with the owner-designers, ensuring a highly personal introduction to these private versions of a Sicilian 'paradise'.

We shall stay at the 4\* **Hotel Villa Schuler** situated in the historic centre. This converted *fin de siècle* villa is the oldest owner-run hotel in Taormina, still in the family of the original owners. The terraced garden overlooks the Gulf of Naxos with the eastern slopes of Mount Etna in the distance. Many restaurants, bars and shops are within easy walking distance of our hotel. Guests should also note that there are many steps and narrow streets in the town, though little or no vehicle traffic.

## ITINERARY OUTLINE

**Day 1:** Friday 17 April – We fly from Gatwick to Catania arriving mid-afternoon and drive northwards to Taormina, located close to the north-eastern corner of Sicily. After check-in at the 4\* **Hotel Villa Schuler** we have dinner in a local restaurant - wine, water and coffee are included with all group lunches and dinners.

**Day 2:** Saturday 18 April – On our first full day we drive southwards to the northern outskirts of **Catania**. We begin at **Parco Paterno' del Toscano**. Devised by renowned post-war landscape architect Enrico Paterno, the botanical garden is rich in palm varieties displayed across a number of asymmetrical rooms. We then travel to

visit the nearby home and garden created by Rossella Pezzino Geronimo. Her **Stanze in Fiore di Canalicchio** is a sensory journey across a number of floral rooms with rare tropical and subtropical plants inspired by her many travels. A Burmese 'secret garden', an Oriental rock garden and a marvellous Arabic irrigation system ties the disparate parts together, a fascinating whole set round the splendid Neo-classical villa which is our hostess' home. We shall enjoy lunch in the garden after which we return to Taormina where the evening will be free.

**Day 3:** Sunday 19 April – We begin in **Taormina** with a visit to the town's **Greek Theatre** dating from the third century BC with later Roman additions. Dug directly from the rock of the promontory, spectators still enjoy quite extraordinary views of the Gulf of Naxos and nearby Mount Etna. We then drive southwards to the eastern slopes of Mount Etna to visit **Villa Trinita**, a new garden designed by the landscape architect and artist owner of the estate. Carved from a medieval lava flow, the garden is peppered with contemporary and ancient ornamental elements and densely planted with citrus plants, grape vines and an array of trees, including the wild oak which once covered Mount Etna. We have a private lunch on the estate and that afternoon we continue the short distance to the coastal town of **Acireale**. This late nineteenth century town garden, **Casa Pennisi**, is the area's oldest and is a rare survival. The attentive owners have maintained its original iron gazebo, fountains and folly following a careful restoration of the garden and some of the adjacent *fin de siècle* villa which was originally a hotel. Following our visit and afternoon refreshments in the garden, we return to Taormina. The evening shall be free.

**Day 4:** Monday 20 April – Today we drive southwards beyond Catania, along the Ionian coastline of the island to visit two remarkable modern gardens. The **Giardino di San Giuliano** is owned by the current Marquis of San Giuliano who commissioned three distinct garden spaces: an Arabic room, a tropical room and a scented room all divided by low stone walls and enclosed by the estate's huge citrus orchard which produces a million kilos of oranges! The estate manager and head gardener, our guide Rachel Lamb, will show us this fascinating garden and impressive citrus estate, after which we shall also enjoy a private lunch in the garden. In the afternoon we drive the very short distance to **Il Biviere**, the creation of Princess Maria Carla Borghese, whose daughter-in-law will be our guide. A good water supply and the fecund lava-based soil has helped the Princess fashion a series of green rooms joined by sloping banks, lined with Aleppo palms and an extraordinary array of succulents. Following our visit, we return to our hotel in Taormina where the evening will be free.

**Day 5:** Tuesday 21 April – Our single visit this morning in **Taormina** focuses on **Casa Cuseni** where we shall be received for a private guided visit of the reception rooms of the house and terraced garden. One hundred years ago the English watercolourist, Robert Kitson, sought to escape the British winter, creating his Sicilian home as a base for his Mediterranean travels. He quickly established the house as an international art salon. Painters, poets, playwrights and politicians continued to visit when the estate's second owner, the British author Daphne Phelps, lived in the house. Her paintings and furnishings depict an idyllic Sicilian life well-lived. Sir Frank Brangwyn's murals survive in the villa as does his garden, designed as a 'Mount Etna landscape' with geometric rooms full of flowers and plants tumbling into the pathways. After lunch, not included, the remainder of the afternoon will be free for leisurely explorations of the town. We meet again in the evening for our final dinner in one of Taormina's more renowned restaurants close to the town's cathedral.

**Day 6:** Wednesday 22 April – We leave our hotel after breakfast and drive to Catania airport and our late-morning return flight to London's Gatwick airport.

## PRACTICALITIES

**Price** £2350                      **Without Flights** £2175                      **Deposit** £300  
**Single Supplement**        £295 (Double Room for Sole Use with a Garden View), subject to availability  
    £395 (Double Room for Sole Use with a Sea View), subject to availability  
**All shared rooms have a Sea View**

**Hotel** 5 nights with breakfast at the 4\* Hotel Villa Schuler, Taormina

**Flights** EasyJet

Outward:            **EZY8567** Departs London Gatwick **1145** arrive Catania **1555**

Return:             **EZY8566** Departs Catania **1140** arrive London Gatwick **1400**

**Price includes** 2 dinners & 3 lunches with wine, water & coffee, all local transfers, City Tax, entry fees & gratuities, the services of Rachel Lamb and our local Tour Manager James Hill

**Not included** Travel to/from Gatwick, 3 dinners & 1 lunch



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