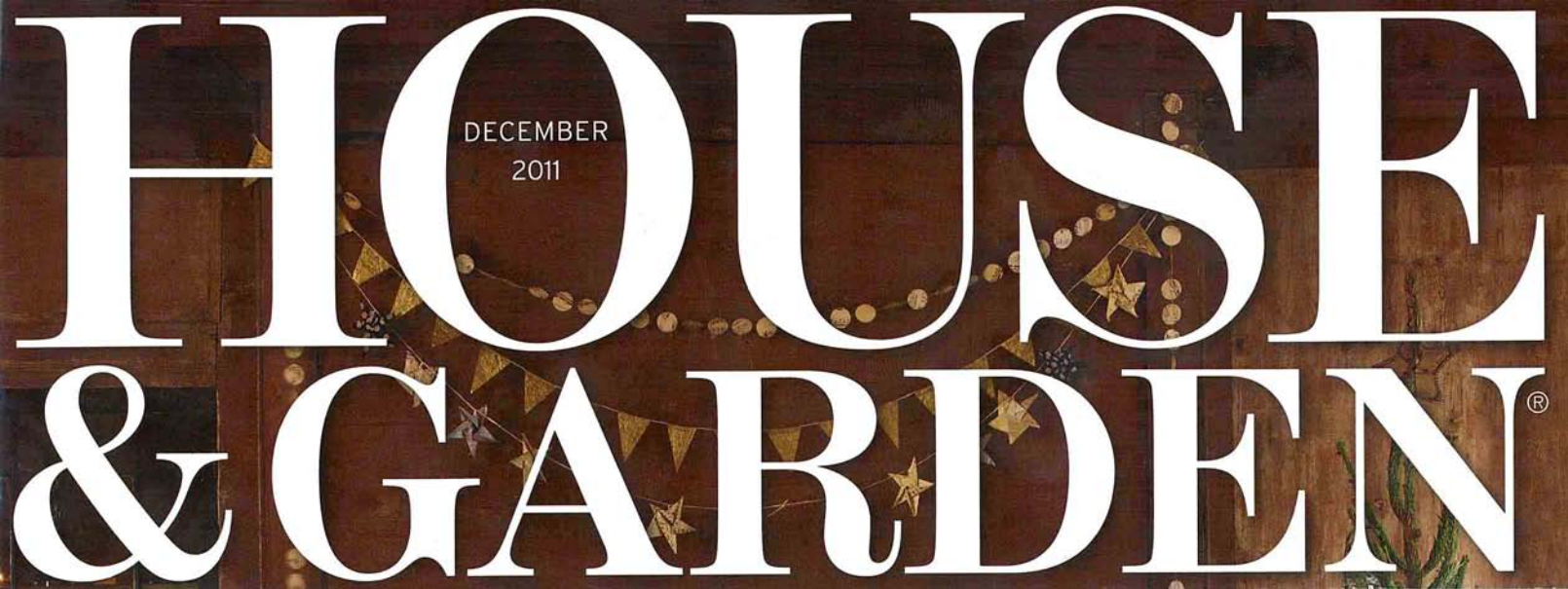


# HOUSE & GARDEN®



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TEXT CAROLINE BECK | PHOTOGRAPHS ALLAN POLLOK-MORRIS

# SCENTS AND

*At the palazzo near Rome where she spent summers as a child, garden proportion with a fluid mix of roses, lavender and wild flowers, creating*



A photograph of a garden featuring a swimming pool, olive trees, and lavender beds. The pool is in the upper left, surrounded by a green lawn and olive trees. In the foreground, there are dense beds of lavender and other flowering plants. The background shows rolling hills and mountains.

The swimming pool is surrounded by olive trees and beds richly planted with lavender. Beyond can be seen mountains covered in oak and olive trees

# SENSIBILITY

*designer Arabella Lennox-Boyd has combined her innate sense of a garden that is at once unmistakably Italian and essentially English*



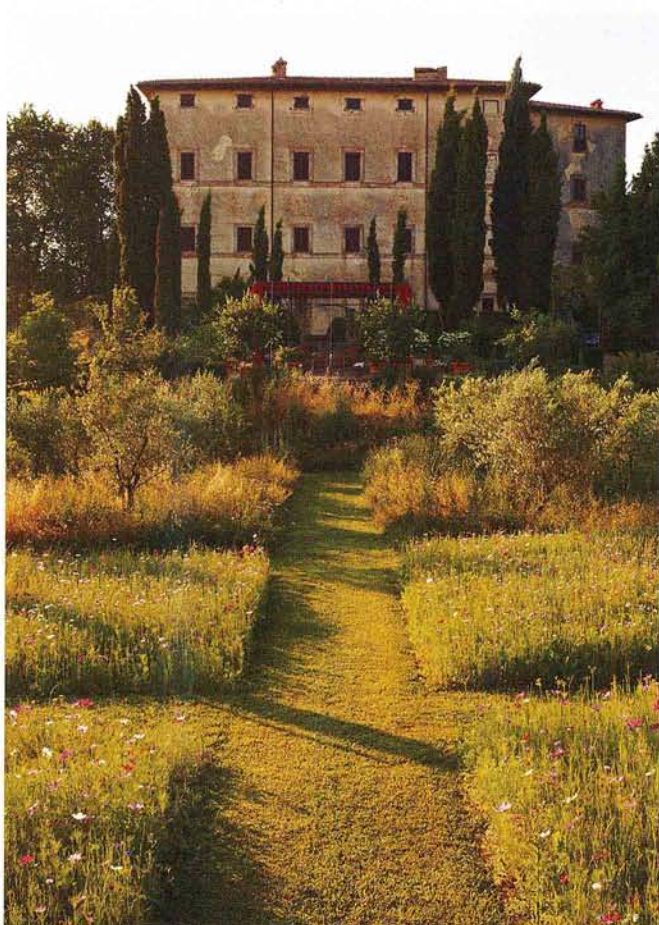
If you close your ears to the sounds of Italian children playing in the hilltop village, and ignore the scent of hot sun on cut grass, you could almost be in an English garden. Italian gardens are not known for their flowers, unless they're bright pelargoniums planted in pots, but in the gardens of Palazzo Parisi you feel a certain familiarity. There are well-tended roses here and lavender too, trellises made from lashed-together sticks supporting scrambling climbers, and meadows studded with blue cornflowers. Then suddenly you see a sign nailed to a wicket gate reading 'Please keep all the gates shut, the irises are the porcupine's delicacy', and it feels mercifully very far away from England.

Palazzo Parisi is the sort of place that haunts the northern European, especially after a cold, grey winter when our slow spring is not enough. We need to head south and feel some real warmth, to see plants in full flower rather than struggling against biting winds. The award-winning garden designer Arabella Lennox-Boyd was born in Italy and the palazzo was her family's summer residence, a place that defined her childhood. She moved to England in 1964 and, with a foot in both Italy and England, she has tapped into this yearning, designing a garden that fulfils our longing – and maybe hers, too – for visual beauty, elegant proportions and peace.

Arabella went to school in Rome and her continual scrutiny of the city has, she believes, embedded in her a visual sense of proportion. 'I was used to seeing things, really seeing them – how could I not in that city full of beautiful buildings?' she says. But it was in England, where she trained as a landscape designer, that she learnt how to blend plant colours, textures and forms to create a fluid architecture.

It is this marriage of Italy and England that makes the garden so seductive. Here are tall exclamation marks of cypresses as seen in every Italian religious and landscape painting from the thirteenth century onwards. Here too are rows of olive trees, planted not just for harvesting, but for beauty. Some are underplanted with pinks and agapanthus and in one bed a striking crimson rose scrambles up through the silver leaves. The beds of flowers are carefully terraced with banks of wattle hurdles, like a stage set, each level cascading down into the next. It is Italian style with an English sensibility.

You reach the palazzo after a steep climb up through forests of oak and olive on the Sabine Hills east of Rome. It stands at the top of the village of Oliveto, a place that might have formed



**LEFT** In front of the medieval palazzo, what used to be a yard populated by animals now comprises blocks of meadow planted with native wild flowers and tender annuals, subdivided by mown paths.

**RIGHT** Terraced beds planted with lavender, grasses and *Solanum jasminoides* 'Album' cascade down to the swimming pool









the template for rural Italy, with narrow winding streets, villagers sitting outside in the warm evenings talking animatedly, cockerels crowing and dogs barking vacantly across the hillsides. The building is medieval, built as a fortified house, and it remains implacable – a place, Arabella says, that is ‘very much in the hands of nature’. Violent electrical storms stalk round the palazzo in winter, often cutting off the telephone and power.

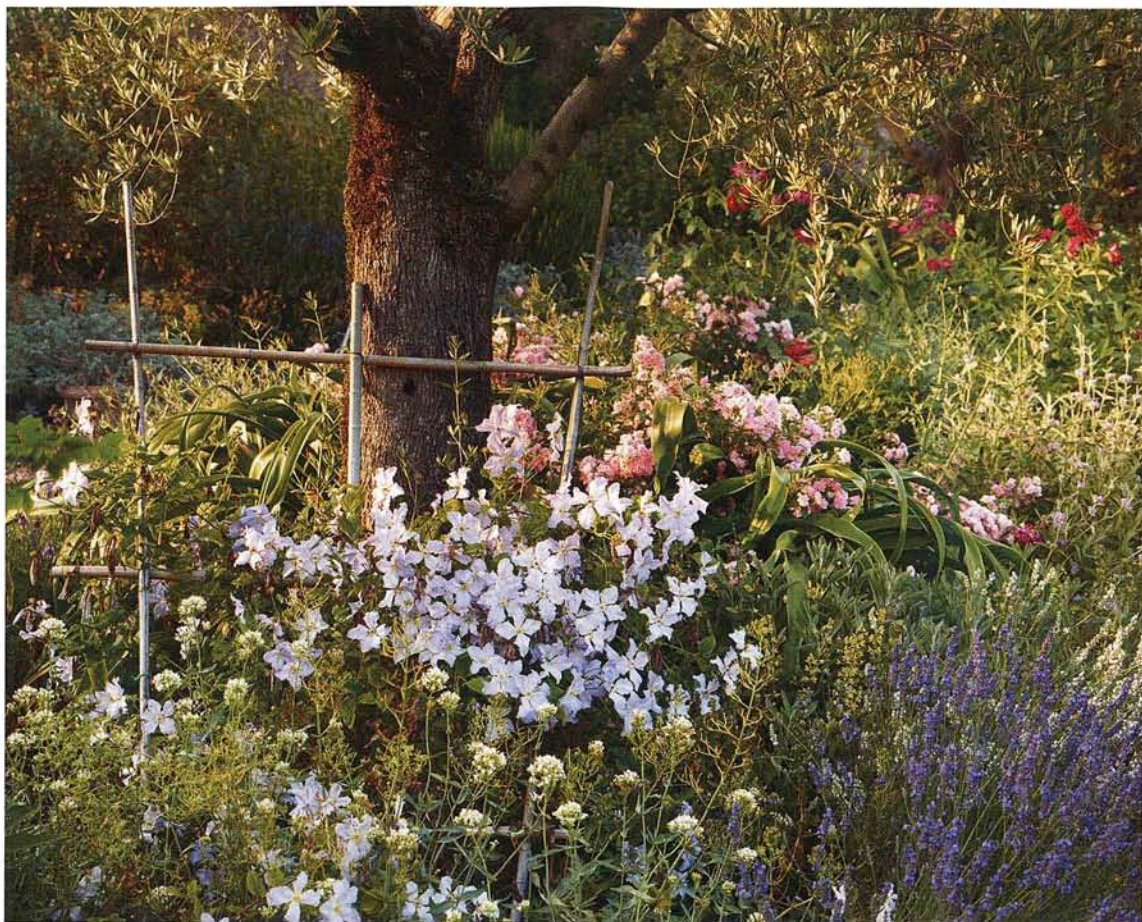
In Arabella’s childhood it was a working farm and when she visited it was by donkey cart, ‘a journey that took for ever up that mountain’. Then, the front of the palazzo was a yard full of horses, chickens, turkeys and the odd pig. ‘My mother once planted a row of trees along the outer edge, which, if anything, made it even more ugly,’ she recalls. Now it comprises rectangles of meadow sown with wild cornflowers, tender zinnias and magenta cosmos, subdivided by mown paths, and in the summer looks like a painting by Fra Angelico. You wouldn’t be surprised to see a beatific Madonna and child amid the delicate flowers. ‘The garden is a reaction to what I grew up with, not a response to it,’ says Arabella.

But it does reflect the surrounding countryside. The clipped box and mop-headed hydrangeas so typical of Italian gardens are there near the house, but the further you stray down towards the ancient chapel, the more the ties are loosened. The native *Iris pallida*, lilac-blue and sweetly scented – and, sadly, a favourite of the porcupines – is one of Arabella’s treasured flowers.





THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Plants scramble up wooden trellis near the pool. Olive trees are underplanted with lavender and roses in a glorious mix of Italian and English planting. The hilltop village of Oliveto can be seen in the distance. Mown paths zigzag through the grassy meadow. OPPOSITE The meadow is pictured in high summer, studded with cornflowers and cosmos







OPPOSITE The high beds that overlook the mountains are punctuated by tall cypresses, a classic feature of the Italian garden. THIS PAGE The beds towards the house (left) are terraced with wattle hurdles and spill out with a mixture of shrubs such as perovskia and native grasses. The tranquil pool (below left), is fringed by olive trees and a pink *Nerium oleander* bush. An avenue of cypresses frames a mown path up to the chapel (below right). Mop-headed hydrangeas (bottom right) are another classic Italian plant





‘Their scent is so powerful it stops me in my tracks,’ she says. Down near the swimming pool, which overlooks miles of uninterrupted forest, the planting is airy, like a meadow, and full of rich purples, cadmium blues and the occasional splash of carmine pink. With the constant mountain breeze, which makes Palazzo Parisi so comfortable even in the height of summer, everything is in motion. Swifts cruise the garden hunting for insects filling themselves up from the flowers, and every half hour the air vibrates to church bells.

In the late nineteenth century, the author and great gardener Elizabeth Von Arnim wrote a classic novel about the power that Italian gardens have upon rain-soaked northern Europeans called *The Enchanted April*. In it, four women escape their husbands, lives and responsibilities for one glorious month to recover themselves at an Italian villa. At the end of the book a hazel walking stick planted in the ground starts to sprout leaves, to the disbelief of one of the women. ‘She had heard of dried staffs, pieces of mere dead wood, suddenly putting forth fresh leaves, but only in legend. She was not in legend. Dignity demanded that she should have nothing to do with fresh leaves at her age; and yet there it was – the feeling that presently, that at any moment now, she might crop out all green.’ The garden at Palazzo Parisi induces just such a renaissance □

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