

SEEDS OF CHANGE

This romantic garden in the Italian mountains provides a masterclass in making an impact while staying true to nature

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Set in the tranquil Tuscan-Emilian Apennines, not far from Bologna, the Casoncello Gardens are a glorious one-hectare tangle of woodland, shrubbery and glades, heady with the scent of oregano and lilac. Teeming with heritage blooms, as well as exotic fruit and vegetables, they were created by former children's theatre actress and self-taught gardener Maria Gabriella Buccioli on inherited ancestral land, where she lives in a small farmhouse with her cartoonist husband Lucio Filippucci. Open to the public since 1996, the gardens provide a supreme example of sustainable, organic cultivation. Here are four key ideas to take from this blossoming jungle.

1. Mix plants with care

The site is designed as a series of interconnecting horticultural 'scenes', including vegetable, rock and herb gardens, an orchard, woodland areas, meadows and flowering borders. All are inspired by traditional English gardens and the horticulture books Maria Gabriella loves to read. The lesson? Rustic planting benefits from subtle planning and a mix of species. 'Wild or ornamental, native or cultivated, everything lives here harmoniously,' she says.

2. Stay sustainable

As firm believers in sustainability, Maria Gabriella and her husband wanted a healthy diversity of wildlife-friendly flowers and edible crops. Thus, the planting is structured as it would be in a forest: everything is packed together tightly and there is a mix of heights, with trees next to small shrubs, bushes next to herb plants and so on. Over the years, this has created a unique microclimate in which plants and produce – from native heritage vegetables to unusual Japanese varieties – can flourish even in harsh winter conditions.

3. Go organic

A pioneer of organic gardening in Italy in the 1980s, Maria Gabriella takes care to avoid using toxic pesticides and fertilisers, instead choosing to concoct natural compost out of cut herbs, leaves, kitchen peelings, ash and manure. She adopts a similarly ethical approach to her planting, propagating certain species found in the wild, sourcing some during trips, growing others from seed and even nurturing varieties that have been blown in by chance on the wind.

4. Play with scale

Many of the plants featured are huge: take the wild cardoon (artichoke thistle) or the 'Paul's Himalayan Musk' rose, which is covered in pale pink flowers. Elsewhere, bountiful bamboo grows in a protective arch over lilies and nettles. This not only gives the garden structure, but also creates secluded nooks in which visitors can linger.

Guided tours of the Casoncello Gardens run from April to September and include a herb-garden tea (giardinidelcasoncello.net) ►

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This page Simple tree-stump seats are fashioned from locust trees that fell after heavy snow
Opposite Self-taught gardener Maria Gabriella Bucciolli transformed her one-hectare plot of inherited land into a blossoming paradise ▶

3 OF THE BEST... GARDENING COURSES

Inspired by Maria Gabriella Buccioli's self-taught style? Try one of these courses.

Sissinghurst Castle Gardens, Cranbrook TN17

Novelist and poet Vita Sackville-West and her husband Harold designed this site as interconnecting garden 'rooms', each with its own character or colour. A visit here inspired Maria Gabriella to open her gardens to the public.

The course 'Gardening at Sissinghurst' (April 29; £75) is a hands-on class that will help you achieve spring garden success (nationaltrust.org.uk/sissinghurst-castle).

The Beth Chatto Gardens, Elmstead, Colchester CO7

Once an overgrown wasteland, this garden now features gravel, scree, woodland and water environments that together enable a variety of plants from around the world to thrive. Founder Beth Chatto, now 91, started the project in 1960 and still works in the garden every day.

The course 'Basic Propagation' (June 7; £49) demonstrates the principles of how and when to sow and harvest seeds, take cuttings and divide herbaceous perennials (bethchatto.co.uk).

Great Dixter House and Gardens, Northiam, Rye TN31

This is the family home of Christopher Lloyd, a pioneer of the heavily planted cottage-style garden. His poetic writing style inspired Maria Gabriella so much that she decided to include blue flowering *Camassia* in her meadow in his memory.

The course 'Good Planting' (June 30; £100) teaches participants to combine plants using colour, shape, texture and balance (greatdixter.co.uk). **ED**

