



Gardens of Sicily

Horticulture & terroir on the slopes of Mount Etna

12–18 May 2026 (MM 957)

£4,160

Speaker: Helena Attlee

Eastern Sicily's most glorious gardens, a number by special arrangement.

Explore Mount Etna's varied and vibrant flora – both cultivated and wild – that flourish in its unique microclimate.

Stay in two elegants 5* hotels, one in vibrant Catania, and one in the heart of the Etna National Park.

Savour authentic Sicilian produce grown in the fertile volcanic soil and brilliantly showcased in the region's cuisine.

Mount Etna dominates Sicily's east coast – Europe's largest volcano and one of the world's most active. Yet despite this, Etna has been remarkably benign, causing only a handful of fatalities since records began. More significantly, Etna's geological activity has created a multitude of lava-based soil types and microclimates that have fostered the evolution of numerous endemic plant and tree varieties.

A dynamic combination of volcanic warmth and Mediterranean moisture has created a unique environment for plantlife. The extraordinary fertility has encouraged generations of gardeners and growers to experiment, making the region home to some of Italy's most delightful gardens. This tour explores several of the finest, from historic estates to contemporary creations, public spaces to private sanctuaries. Between them, they demonstrate a range of horticultural diversity, expertise and creativity. A number of gardens incorporate artistic installations and some make a practical feature of the ancient Arab irrigation systems – the “*saje*” – dating from the 9th century. There are succulents and cacti, exotic trees, sub-tropical and herbaceous plants and more, alongside the farms, fields and orchards that yield Sicily's finest edible (and drinkable) produce.

Etna's mineral-heavy soils produce the rare Bronte pistachio, so valuable that local police have been known to patrol the groves at harvest time. We visit the lava fields where they grow, and taste this ‘green-gold’ at source. A highlight is dinner at the mountain's oldest wine cellar, where volcanic terroir meets centuries of viticulture. Beyond the gardens there is time to explore vibrant Catania and the smaller hill towns, each shaped by their proximity to this fascinating volcano.



Vegetation in Eastern Sicily © Sara Stecca

Itinerary

Day 1, Catania. Fly at c. 2.45pm from London Gatwick to Catania Airport (British Airways). Late night supper at the hotel in Catania, where the first three nights are spent.

Day 2, Catania, Sant'Agata li Battiati, Mascalucia. An introductory walk through Catania is followed by lunch at the Parco Paternò del Toscano, whose historic gardens follow the ancient lava flow. There are two distinct parts to the park: an Etnean forest characterised by lava terracing, and a subtropical garden, renowned for its monumental plants. The entire area is under environmental heritage protection. Continue to Villa Trinità; curated by the agronomist and artist, Salvatore Bonajuto, the botanical garden includes camelias, citrus groves and 18 varieties of fig in its impressive repertoire of plants.

Day 3, Augusta, Lentini. Drive south to Commenda di San Calogero, a converted 14th-century monastery. The design of its lush

gardens was inspired by Arabella Lennox Boyd, a mentor of the owner. English, Islamic and Venetian elements form the basis of a magical planting scheme. Continue to Giardino del Biviere, property of the Borghese family, who created a Mediterranean garden and organic farm on the estate. A guided visit is followed by lunch. Free time to explore Catania in the afternoon.

Day 4, Canalicchio, Giarre. Visit Le Stanze in Fiore, the remarkable seven-acre garden of Rossella Pezzino de Geronimo in the grounds of a neo-classical country villa. Listed in the international network of the ‘Great Gardens of the World’, this sensory oasis brings together over 1000 species of rare tropical and sub-tropical plants, interspersed with sculpture, in landscaping relating to the four elements. En route to Linguaglossa, stop at Radicepura, a horticultural park dedicated to garden design and architecture. First of three nights in Linguaglossa.

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continued

Day 5, Mount Etna, Randazzo. A guided walk on Mount Etna (*moderately challenging; sturdy walking boots required*) with a local volcanologist reveals the geological forces that shaped this dramatic landscape. At Piano Provenzana, explore the lava fields formed during the 2002 eruptions and see the towering pines of the Ragabo forest. In the afternoon, there is some time to discover the medieval charm of the village of Randazzo.

Day 6, Bronte, Milo. In the morning, drive to Bronte on the western slopes of Mount Etna. Here, the volcanic soil creates the ideal environment for growing the famous pistachio. Visit a pistachio farm, followed by a tasting. The evening is spent in a local winery, where the final dinner is paired with wines from its vineyard.

Day 7, From Catania to London. Drive to Catania Airport. Fly from Catania to London Gatwick at c. 12.15pm.

The tour is dependent on the kindness of many individuals and organisations, some of whom are reluctant to make arrangements far in advance, so the order of visits outlined above may change and there may be substitutions for some gardens mentioned.

Lecturer

Helena Attlee. Writer, lecturer, tutor, Helena Attlee has been an Italian garden expert for over thirty years. After publishing several books on the subject, she focussed on the story of citrus in Italy and wrote *The Land Where Lemons Grow*, a bestseller that was also broadcast as Radio 4's Book of the Week. Her latest book, due for publication in 2026, is about Mount Etna in Sicily. She is a Consultant Fellow of the Royal Literary Fund, leads academic writing workshops for PhD students all over Britain, and teaches creative writing both here and abroad.

Practicalities

Included: travel by private coach; hotel accommodation; breakfasts; 3 lunches and 3 dinners with wine, water, coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. Palazzo Sangiorgio, Catania (palazzosangiorgiocatania.it): a new, elegant 5* hotel located in the heart of the city. Previously Palazzo Hernandez, the building has a rich history which originated in the 18th Century. **Hotel Villa Neri, Linguaglossa** (hotelvillanerietna.com): a luxury boutique 5* hotel set in the beautiful countryside of the Etna National Park. It offers a gourmet restaurant and spa services. *Single occupancy rooms are doubles for sole use.*

How strenuous? A good level of fitness is essential. Unless you enjoy entirely unimpaired mobility, cope with everyday walking and stair-climbing without difficulty and are reliably sure-footed, this tour is not for you. The parks and gardens are extensive with steep, uneven terrain and terraces. There is a moderately difficult walk on Mount Etna, where the ground can be loose, slippery or muddy. For this excursion, appropriate footwear and clothing are essential. Average distance by coach per day: c. 32 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.