



Tuscan Gardens

The pick of Tuscan gardens and villas

11–16 May 2026 (MM 964)

6 days

Speaker: Dr Katie Campbell

Some of Europe's finest historic gardens, Renaissance to 20th-century.

Selected for historical importance, horticultural interest and visual impact.

A constant backdrop of supremely beautiful Tuscan landscapes.

Many visits are by special arrangement.

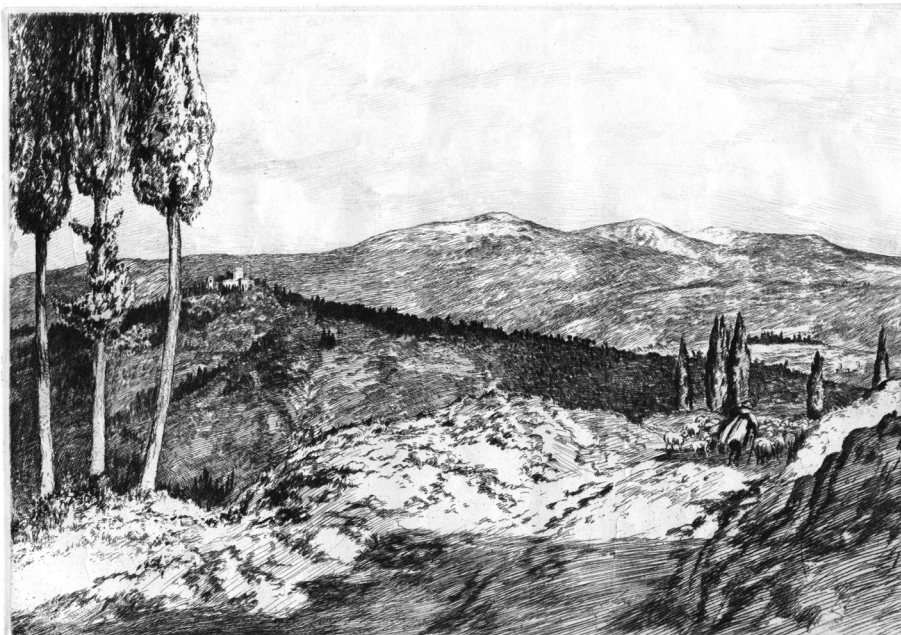
As for lovers of art, so also for lovers of gardens: the allure of Tuscany is irresistible, consisting of a dense concentration of historically important and magically beautiful examples which are ensconced in landscapes and urban settings of exceptional attractiveness.

Some of the world's earliest surviving gardens are here; a couple on this tour date to the 15th century. There's a clutch of immensely influential gardens of the 16th century, creations of the ruling Medici dynasty, and fine examples from the next couple of centuries are also present. Most of the planting has periodically been renewed of course, but modern curatorship and conservation practices have brought these historic gardens closer to their original appearance than they have been for a very long time.

Some of the most attractive gardens in the region do not pretend to be historicist recreations, however, but are 20th-century variations on the 'Italian' style. Some have French or English ingredients, some elements are entirely original, but nevertheless they remain quintessentially Tuscan.

A prime mover here was the ex-pat community in and around Florence in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It was numerous, generally inclined towards matters aesthetic and not infrequently very rich. Their patronage, and the genius of English garden designer Cecil Pincent, gave rise to the Anglo-American Renaissance Revival which incorporated traditional forms and ingredients into innovative and enchanting designs.

The famously distinctive Tuscan landscape, with its terraced hillsides, complex textures and subtle variety of greens – olives, cypress trees, vines, oak and pasture – not only provides a constant backdrop to these gardens but, in many cases, played a role in the designer's scheme. The tilting topography necessitated



Fiesole, 20th-century etching.

the terraces from which the surrounding countryside and the valley settlements can be viewed.

The Renaissance revival of Classical learning quickened the development of the villa as a place of retreat and as a resort for intellectual and horticultural pastimes. Allied to this was the transformation of the medieval, antagonistic attitude towards nature towards one of joy in the sight of nearby farmland and distant vistas.

Itinerary

Day 1: Fiesole, Cappanori. Fly at c. 8.30am from London Heathrow to Pisa (British Airways). On the way to Fiesole visit the Baroque garden at Villa Torrigiani, the most attractive of the group of 17th-century villas around Lucca. First of three nights in Fiesole.

Day 2: Fiesole, Castello. Enter the enchanting world of Anglo-American gardens of the early 20th century at Villa Le Balze. Designed by Pinsent and Scott for the American philosopher Charles Augustus Strong (with Rockefeller money), it comprises a sequence of terraces, enclosed within walls or open to

spectacular view of Florence. The Villa Medicea at Castello, created from 1537 for Grand Duke Cosimo I by Tribolo and Buontalenti, is important historically – the least altered of major 16th-century gardens – and fascinating horticulturally. Nearby Petraia was made for another Medici from 1576 and later remodelled.

Day 3: Pratolino, near Florence. Villa Gamberaia near Settignano, one of the loveliest gardens in Italy; it achieved its present form during the ownership of a Romanian princess from 1896 and an American heiress after 1924. The largest of the Anglo-American gardens, La Pietra was created by Arthur Acton (father of Harold); 57 acres, 'rooms', vistas, a green theatre, 180 statues and much else. The afternoon is free; Fiesole is a very attractive hill-top town with Romanesque cathedral and Roman theatre; alternatively, the centre of Florence is half an hour by bus.

Day 4: Fiesole, San Casciano in Val di Pesa, Pienza. Though altered subsequently, the broad terraces around the villa in Fiesole built for Giovanni de Medici in the 1450s are of huge importance for the primacy attached to leisure and for embracing magnificent views. Villa

Tuscan Gardens continued

Poggio Torselli has undergone a recent award-winning restoration; a magnificent avenue, a grand 17th-century house and an unexpected burst of floral and citrus abundance, surrounded by Chianti countryside. Continue south to Pienza for the first of two nights.

Day 5: La Foce, Montepulciano. In the morning visit La Foce, a social and agricultural project as much as a villa and garden, but here Pissinatti designed for the redoubtable Iris Origo one of the last, and some say the greatest, of the Anglo-Florentine gardens. Stop for lunch and some independent exploration time in the charming town of Montepulciano.

Day 6: Siena, Collodi. Drive to Villa Vico Bello, a splendid example of a Renaissance park with an Italian garden. Lunch is included here. En route to the airport visit the Garzoni Garden, which represents a combination between Renaissance geometrics and the spectacular character of the Baroque. Fly from Pisa to Heathrow, arriving c. 9.00pm.

Lecturer

Dr Katie Campbell. Writer, garden historian and lecturer. She has taught at Birkbeck, Bristol and Buckingham Universities, writes for various publications and leads art and garden tours. Her *British Gardens in Time* accompanied a BBC TV series. Other books include *Paradise of Exiles*, *Icons of 20th-century Landscape Design* and *Policies & Pleasances: A Guide to Scotland's Gardens*. Her most recent book, *Cultivating the Renaissance*, charts the evolution of Renaissance ideas on philosophy, politics and aesthetics as reflected in the Medici's Tuscan villas.

Practicalities

Included: travel by private coach; accommodation as described below; breakfasts, 3 lunches and 4 dinners with wine, water, coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. Hotel Villa Fiesole, Fiesole (villafiesole.it): an excellently located 4-star hotel with beautiful views of Florence. **Relais Il Chiostro, Pienza** (relaisilchiostrodiienza.com): a somewhat basic hotel in a former friary dating to the 15th century, excellently situated off the main square of the town, but smaller and more rustic than its 4-star rating would suggest. Despite being the best available in the town, standards of decor and maintenance are lower than hotels in major cities. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use throughout.*

How strenuous? A good level of fitness is essential. Some gardens are very large, many are on sloping ground or have tiered gardens, and the coach will often not be able to set down at the entrance to the sites. Average distance by coach per day: 40 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.