

THE  
**Mediterranean**

**Garden** No. 111 January 2023



# FLAMES AND FLOWERS: THE TRSTENO ARBORETUM REVISITED

Duncan J.D. Smith

---

In 2003 I relocated from the north of England to Vienna, a move that prompted my subsequent career as a travel writer. The Austrian capital fostered in me a passion for offbeat locations, which I've since had the good fortune to discover and publish across Europe. No two locations are ever the same but there are certain types of places that always attract my attention, and gardens are one of them. My latest project, a guidebook to the Croatian city of Dubrovnik, is no exception, with the inclusion of the Trsteno Arboretum.

Trsteno has been covered before in the pages of this journal. In 2002, an article by Lady Jadranka Beresford-Peirce detailed the garden's history from the Renaissance period onwards (*TMG* 28). At that time, Trsteno was recovering from damage inflicted in 1991 during the Croatian War, a recovery hastened by the involvement of the International Trust for Croatian Monuments, which Beresford-Peirce founded with her husband in 1991. Then, in 2000, the garden was again damaged, this time by a forest fire. Still the author managed to finish on a positive note, as she reported seeing dead trees felled and new planting in progress. My own visit in September 2022 now brings the story up to date.

Trsteno Arboretum occupies a steep limestone hillside sloping down to the Adriatic. Watered by a spring and the beneficiary of mild, humid winters, it is laid out across several hundred man-made terraces, which rise almost 330 feet above sea level. According to legend, a member of Dubrovnik's noble Gučetić family on his way to the Crusades established the arboretum with a single oak. In truth, it was created in 1494 (together with the family's summer villa) by one Ivan Marinov Gučetić, using native plants as well as exotics brought back by sea captains from elsewhere in the Mediterranean.

The founding concepts of the original Renaissance arboretum still hold today, namely that architecture and nature be fused to create a harmonious whole, and that plants be as useful as

they are decorative. These tenets are reflected in the roughly geometric plan of the garden, with its main axis leading down to the villa, and a traditional 15th-century olive press. The original villa was rebuilt following an earthquake in 1667, and the arboretum's most striking architectural feature, the Fountain of Neptune, was reworked a century later in the Baroque style.

In 1948, the Gučetić family handed Trsteno over to the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts. Since 2017, and with considerable financial support from the European Union's European Regional Development Fund, a total of around EUR 185,000 has been spent on restoring the arboretum and the fruits of these labours are immediately apparent. The two magnificent plane trees (*Platanus orientalis*), for example, which have stood sentinel for the last 500 years on the roadside outside the arboretum, have been carefully pruned and their heaviest boughs strapped.

A little farther down the hill is the entrance to the arboretum proper. Immediately one is enveloped in a forest of different greens. Lining the main path are some fine specimen trees, notably oriental hornbeam (*Carpinus orientalis*), to which metal name tags, many hand-painted, have been attached. There are no signs of war or fire damage here. What is noticeable, however, is that deeper into the planting zones the tendency is towards a shady green thicket, including bay (*Laurus nobilis*), star jasmine (*Trachelospermum jasminoides*) and flowering ash (*Fraxinus ornus*), rather than individual groomed plants. One assumes this to be deliberate policy as it is also a feature of the 19th-century Đorđić-Mayneri pleasure garden on the nearby island of Lopud.

The thicket opens out at the Fountain of Neptune, fed by its newly re-pointed fourteen-arch aqueduct, and again at the Gučetić villa, which has recently enjoyed a well-overdue restoration following war damage. The species count increases enormously hereabouts, a reminder of the fact that Trsteno boasts around 465 cultivated species both indigenous and imported. These include trees such as thorny locust (*Gleditsia triacanthos*), Aleppo pine (*Pinus halepensis*) and the fire-resistant Mediterranean cypress (*Cupressus sempervirens*). A wonderful sight is the crape myrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*), an import from

Asia and Oceania that produces a cloud of candyfloss-pink blossoms in late summer. These are accompanied by a profusion of smaller plants, including black bamboo, Banksian roses, and bougainvillea draped over the outside of the villa. Again there are no lingering signs of damage, which is testament not only to the regenerative powers of Mother Nature but also to the fact that in 2001 mains water arrived in Trsteno. This means that hose pipes can now be run out to those parts of the garden that need occasional watering. That said, the majority of species on display are drought-tolerant, including the beautiful blue creeping rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*, sometimes now known as *Salvia rosmarinus*, Prostratus Group), which thrives on the bone-dry terrace walling.



*Lagerstroemia indica*  
drawing by Maggy Fitzpatrick

On the southern side of the villa there is a well-stocked (and well-watered) citrus garden with a grapefruit tree centre stage. Nearby is an impressive California cotton palm (*Washingtonia filifera*) planted around 1900, which is now almost sixty feet in height. A squat sago palm (*Cycas revoluta*) nearby is tiny by

comparison though of course it is not a true palm but rather a seed-producing plant more closely related to conifers.

Between the villa and the sea runs a double row of slender stone pergola pillars, an elegant architectural feature of Dalmatian Renaissance gardens. Clad in vines, they terminate at a red-tiled pavilion looking out to sea. This original 15th-century feature, which was restored after the war, was being set-dressed during my visit for a new film starring Kate Winslet as Lee Miller, the fashion model turned *Vogue* war correspondent during the Second World War. That it also appeared in the hugely popular television series *Game of Thrones* no doubt accounted for the younger visitors I found taking photos here.

The northern side of the villa is different again. Considerably drier than its southern counterpart, it features large-spiked agaves, flowering yuccas and prickly pears (*Opuntia ficus-indica*). Beyond there is an impressive palm tree avenue that leads to a forested hillside, known as *Druvarica* (meaning 'wood'), added during the late-19th century. Tumbling down to the water's edge, this is the only area that still bears some physical scars of the fire in 2000.

From here one can walk back up to the main road past an extramural feature of the arboretum that is easy to miss. The Historic Olive Grove is not actually that old but rather it contains old varieties in a tranquil green meadow, which despite the late summer heat managed to appear like a springtime scene in Greece. The fifteen varieties range from *Bjelica*, one of the oldest varieties in the Southern Adriatic, to *Velika Lastovka*, which has been grown only in the last two hundred years and was probably brought over from the island of Korčula. If this part of the arboretum is anything to gauge the rest of Trsteno by then everything in the arboretum is rosy.