

The Designer



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APLD 20th Anniversary Italian Garden Tour

By: Emily Kelting, Associate member, APLD

We met at the Villa Malpensa, the real McCoy-- a saffron-colored villa close to the Milan airport on September 8, 2009. A diverse group of 22 landscape designers and guests, all from different states, we downed the *caffè* and *croissants* and were punctually herded onto our tour bus at 8 AM the next day for our first destination--Lake Como.



1st row, left to right: Gerald Deharsh (standing), Emily Kelting, Tina Nyce, Judith Drake, Jean Lewis, Elva Edger, Kathy Hubner, Marsha White, Donna Swansen, Sam Swansen, Robyn Gulstrom, Diane Swanson, Patrick Devereux
2nd row: Cathy Edger, Claire Siegel, Andy White, Rick Laughlin, Don Moore, Susan Ollinger, Geraldine Crouch

Robyn Gulstrom, our Aussie-come-American tour leader, arranged for us to get a view of the Italian Lakes, Tuscany, and Florence that few Americans—even few gardeners—seldom see. There were tours of private, family-owned villas and gardens where the owners were there to greet us. One of our guides, Nancy Leszczynski, a landscape architect, writer, and lecturer at New York University's Florence campus at Villa La Pietra, gave us plans for each garden, filled us in on the juicy bits of the villa's history, and identified plants along the way.

Restaurants seemingly in the middle of nowhere served course after course of *antipasti*, pasta, main courses and desserts, all washed down by delicious Tuscan wine. Robyn also arranged private olive oil and wine tastings and a visit to the chapel in the Villa Pitiana (where we stayed in Tuscany) that dated back to 1039.

I felt as if I had wandered onto the set of "Enchanted April" or "Under the Tuscan Sun." The hills were filled with olive groves and vineyards, the sun shimmered on the lakes; the narrow cobblestone streets were difficult to navigate for poor Victor, the bus driver, but oh, so quaint—even the doorways are exquisite. And the GARDENS!!! Some like the Villa Medici, Villa Cetinale, and Villa Gamberaia contained classic Renaissance features such as carefully clipped boxwood parterres, bosques, grottoes, lovely private chapels, *limonaias* (buildings used to overwinter the potted lemon and citrus trees), fountains and sculpture, rills, and even

water "jokes" (the joke was on us when Nancy turned on the sprinklers at the Villa Reale). Other gardens, like Isola Bella and Villa Torrigiani, were created by powerful men who were clearly going for Baroque—the more statuary and stonework the better.

In addition to our garden viewing, we also fit in city tours of Siena, San Gimignano, and Florence. On the bus or over drinks and dinner, we shared our impressions of the gardens and our own business practices. As I listened to my fellow designers talk about their businesses, my admiration grew and grew. I clearly have lots to learn!

On September 18, we gathered in Florence for our farewell dinner. Tributes abounded. We toasted Robyn for putting together an incredible tour with every detail seen to...and Victor, our intrepid bus driver who maneuvered our bus through streets so narrow that it was scary to even walk them. We toasted the indefatigable 92-year-old Elva Edger, the mother-in-law of designer Cathy Edger. Elva charmed us with her wit and gentle spirit, but we were most impressed by her energy. She is truly an inspiration for all of us.



The greatest tributes were given to Donna and Sam Swansen. Donna and Peggy Connors founded APLD when landscape design was in its infancy and women weren't heartily embraced in the profession. Sam and Don Connors, Peggy's husband, did all of APLD's legal work from the very beginning and supported both Donna and Peggy and their dream of APLD every step of the way. We each gave toasts to Donna and Sam for their love and commitment to each other, and to the landscape profession. How fortunate we all are to be beneficiaries of their efforts, which 20 years later culminated in this unforgettable trip to Italy!



Emily Kelting, Associate member, APLD