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**The Journal of a Gardener in Tuscany – April 2004 Part 2**

**By Rupert Mayhew**

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Lavender & Tourists Appear

April 24th 2004

This week we have made the garden ready for the busy tourist season, with just a few minor jobs, such as the new Lemon tree, left to go. La Doccia is full now for the first time this year. While every day this week I came back from my language course in Florence, arrived at La Doccia and found my Father pottering around with another car load of new plants from the Vivaio at Rosano.

Four types of Lavender were planted, all lavender attracts bees and butterflies, and with about 12 each of four different types of Lavender we should attract an eclectic mix of bees and butterflies. Lavandula stoechas is one type and already it is producing purple trumpet-like flowers across the front rose beds and the scent of Lavender is everywhere, especially on the rose bed along the terrace. This Rose bed lines the main terrace and fills the gaps from the Lavender we removed last Autumn and replanted in more shrubby flower beds. They grew a little too large so needed a more permanent position. The Lavender buying spree since has led to about 50 plants; this should keep the bees happy, and with some luck one might find the bee home I set up for them in the herbaceous border. This was surprisingly vacant when I checked on Tuesday and the banking business cards I used to create a split look dry and unused. The bees have yet to discover this palace waiting for them.

What is more, the bird feeder my Mother and I hung from a walnut tree on a snowy February afternoon is still untouched, this must be a record for failure in birdfeeders. I'd like to think I can change the food to solve the problem but the truth is I haven't seen a single bird even approach the feeder let alone turning up their nose at the food we offer.

I will remove the bird feeder to a new spot if I have no luck. Needless to say the two birdboxes are empty as well. The birds are here, we know that as we hear them all the time. But the accommodation appears to be unsatisfactory, My Father's generous advice of putting up 'To Let' signs next to the birdhouses were noted but I don't think this will really help the situation. I could move them but as I'm in

England next week I could also buy several more and then at least one should be filled with an adventurous bird in time. In the meantime I feel like blaming everyone and anyone, perhaps this is as they are too close to the house? Or the dogs are scaring the birds off? or general human activity, ie the strolling up and down the garden of us and our guests? Or my whistling as I pot another plant?

After a thunderstorm I replanted 31 roses from a flowerbed too shaded for them to flourish. After three years they have produced a paltry collection of flowers and they went into the new flowerbed Antonio built outside Larissa as well as some into a Wine Pot and the bed over Antonio's wall. They will receive more sun here and have more space to grow into. The Roses look well but without the lawnmower the lawn looks like a meadow; all we need are a couple of cows with large bells round their neck.

April Showers and... April Showers

April 17th 2004

'Brings forth May flowers' so the saying goes, I am looking forward to the May flowers for sure, with this rain the flowers should be visible from outer space. And gardening in heavy rain is not such an easy activity either. That said once you are outside it isn't so bad, it's the going out and coming in that is difficult, and the Labrador doesn't mind, so long as she has a plastic flower pot to launch a frenzied attack on.

The lawn is looking a delicate soft green and growing fast, a mix of clover, grass, and newly planted grass is appearing too in what is excellent grass growing conditions. Grass grows so long as it is 43°F (6°C) or above and it likes damp wet conditions, which sums up the last two months well. It was a pity the lawnmower decided to die on me yesterday, now was to be its moment of glory, of total dominion over the garden, instead it is taking a break at the local Lawnmower Hospital. Strimmers are more popular in Italy and traditionally you wait until there are wild flowers everywhere before spending a morning 'Cleaning' the land, or cutting back everything pretty until lunchtime calls.

The new Azalea bed was completed this week, full of Azaleas and Rhododendrums in the special north facing flowerbed, (with slow drainage and acidic soil it should mimic the conditions Azaleas like in the wild as well as anywhere in Tuscany). All our temporary plastic greenhouses are clear of pot plants and to celebrate their freedom one of the two plastic greenhouses decided to fly off into the orchard during the storm last night. It is now caught up in the wild roses below, a hazardous place to go to without a strong scythe. I pinned the other one down with more stones, this one has my Rosemary cuttings for the new Rosemary hedge to go along the lawn at Francesca so is especially important. I planted the Rosemary hedge this week with 12 plants, along with hopefully 16 cuttings, assuming I lose only half of my cuttings, is this a fair percentage? I have absolutely no idea and would appreciate any feedback on what to expect. What I don't want to happen is for Lombardo to strim the hedge before it grows to size, so I'll have a word with him in broken Italian tomorrow.

The Arno and Sieve rivers are flowing faster than I have ever seen, their levels are so high that in Florence today people were standing on the bridges just watching the huge amounts of flotsam flowing to the sea. The heavy rain has filled many aquifers and will hopefully ensure there is no repeat of last year when it was so dry the wine and olive harvest were badly down everywhere. That said, the key

months here are May to August, this is when periods without rain, like we had last year, are most needed. Two months without rain is hard everywhere and this year everyone is waiting to see how the weather turns out and whether we'll have a better year.

Rupert Mayhew recently moved to Tuscany, Italy, from a career in IT in London. He works in and runs an expanding agriturismo and this new role includes the task of creating a garden out of what is now mountainside. <http://www.ladocciawelcomes.com.rmayhew@pemba-adventures.com>

## **The Journal of a Gardener in Tuscany – Early April 2004**

**By Rupert Mayhew**

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The Journal of a Gardener in Tuscany - April 2004 part I  
Early

March Winds and April Showers

April 10th 2004

I replanted two flowering trees at the request of my Father, he cannot remember their names but one has yellow flowers and the other is a 'pink thing'. The 'pink thing' did not enjoy being placed in the shade last year under Lombardo's loggia, or shaded terrace, so we have planted it with the 'yellow thing' on the bank just above the courtyard. This is a new area of the garden after Lombardo build a flowerbed here in which he planted some tulips, his speciality which he brought to us from his own garden.

With bulbs in the base of the wall, roses to be planted a few inches back followed by the slope of wild flowers then the flowering trees, or 'things', and the cypresses behind (so typical of Tuscany) the bank in the courtyard should become a pleasant site in years to come. The trouble with much of the gardening we do here is that it is the future we must think of. We aren't just building a garden for the here and now, but one which will evolve, and I am aware of the three year law for any tree. That after planting we should wait three years before expecting to see anything happen. Painfully slow.

I have started to count and clear the olive trees on the land. We have acres and acres of what were once Olive groves but which have gone to ruin. Scrub and then woodland has invaded the land and it needs work, much of it consists of hacking through the undergrowth, cutting away the scrub surrounding the tree by hand, then pulling it away, an exhausting task which simply cannot be substituted by any machine without damaging the trees. We have a lot of land to cover, and every time I uncover a tree I see another top of silver and green shining among the scrub, I sigh at the thought of the extra exertion and so I head off to clear that too, then I see another, and another, but at least I'll have oil lamps in powercuts and plenty of hair gel in the future...

Olive trees are renowned for longevity and ability to produce fruit despite old age, drought, frost and

fire, so although many are covered in vines, brambles and evil thorny wild roses they should still produce fruit once they are pruned, a task Lombardo and I will start next week. A count revealed 120 trees outside the young olive grove below the garden. Once pruned we should see some fruit in about 18 months, painfully slow again, but as farms go, at least it is low maintenance, and olive groves look beautiful all year round.

The PH Sampler from the garden centre proved fun and I spent an afternoon sticking it into the ground and checking the results with my PH Chart, this useful chart tells me, for instance, where I can plant rhubarb depending on the soil, or artichokes or potatoes, should I feel the urge. I don't really trust it though, as it was so cheap, but I do look scientific as I walk the lands, instead of looking like a

neaderthal with stone age tools. The hill sides all across Tuscany are now showing young green or yellow buds, the diversity of colour across the hillsides is a pleasant change from the grey brown of winter, and even better is to know that in a couple of weeks they will all be different shades of soft green.

### Wine Pots

April 3rd 2004

A trip to the winery to buy a demijohn of wine ended up in a large flowerpot buying session as well. The Frescobaldi are one of the largest wine producers in Italy, they make wine on neighbouring land to us and have a large local winery. We turned up hoping to fill our 54 litre demijohn of wine and ended up buying some ten half oak barrels once used for wine making as well.

In many Agriturismos in Tuscany the barrels are used first to store wine and then, when their winemaking days are over, as large flowerpots. They never seem to hold more than a few dry pansies or geraniums at best, and the wine barrels, or 'wine pots' as we christened them, are coated along the inside with a thick hard coat of red wine sediment. The barrel smells of wine and whatever we plant will have to reconcile itself with the fact that it is living in a wine barrel, and quite possibly any blooms will smell a little of wine too. We are avoiding Geraniums in these as it's tempting to plant lemon trees in the barrels, so we have wine flavoured lemons jingling in our gin and tonics.

The garden is growing frantically and the banks are covered in a multitude of wild flowers and wild mint, so walking anywhere away from the lawn releases a strong minty aroma underfoot. We took the geraniums out of the greenhouses and are scattering them across the property, nothing is left in the greenhouses and we are now only waiting until May before we buy the lemon trees for the large pot in the car park.

A day in Florence with friends inevitably led to a long lunch at San Spirito Piazza followed by a walk in the Boboli gardens just south of the Arno in Florence. The gardens are filled with Italian curiosities, such as statues and follies, and everywhere you turn you are greeted with another compelling view such as the Palazzo Vecchio one moment, and the Duomo the next, or both. It is a stunning location and the gardens are full of plants that are so successful here such as cypress, bay trees and wild flowers. The latter would seem to fill the area to many that should be a lawn, but a formal wild flower

lawn, in April, can work.

We are planning a row of lavender in front of the rose bed on the terrace, as well as a hedge to line the lawn in the garden of Francesca, beech is a candidate for this, as is something slightly herbal, such as Rosemary, which is flowering across the valley. The plum trees by the villas were pruned heavily, in the hope they will produce some fruit for the first time in four years, and elsewhere fruit trees are making themselves known by showing off their bright blossoms, allowing me to plan where to cut away scrub and prune next winter. The next few weeks will be busy in the garden now as we bring the garden up to scratch and carry out the plans we made over the winter months.

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