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The Journal of a Gardener in Tuscany – March 2004 Part I

By Rupert Mayhew

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The Iris Season

March 13th 2004 - It seems that every wall, every verge and every garden in Tuscany grows Iris bulbs and they are now growing frantically, long green blades like tropical grass, ready to spring a colour on us, are everywhere. I hardly noticed these lovely flowers until I first went to Italy, but here they are everywhere and the road to Florence is lined with walls, pots and flowerbeds sporting Irises. The longer days, and some warm weather this week, means spring has finally appeared and has some catching up to do.

The locals here still say this has been the hardest winter in Tuscany for some twenty years, and this follows the hottest summer in closer to half a century. The last snow has left La Doccia and is only visible higher up the mountain near Vallombrosa Monastery, the weather seems to follow consistent three day patterns during the spring, 3 good days are followed by 3 bad days. The bad days mean snow, fog and rain but the good days, although frosty in the morning, warm up and send a genuine buzz around the mountainside. The crocuses open, the lawn flowers, already prevalent, emerge and insects start working away in the garden.

This week, I would say, has been a draw on the bird front. While still no birds have noticed the birdfeeder, neither have any fallen out of the sky. My Great Aunt in Sussex, a keen gardener herself, told my Mother that it takes birds a good month or so before they realise free food, in a bird feeder, is available and so start eating it, and that we should be patient, adding that it is not for nothing they are known as 'bird brains'. Even so I watch the feeder day after day, and when I finally see a hungry bird happily eating away I'll treat myself to a glass of prosecco, the local sparkling wine. If it is a squirrel, I'll probably reach for the gin.

We'll soon have two fields converted to olive groves at the bottom of the hill, they were once olive groves, with a good number of old trees, to which we'll add new trees. The fields now are full of brambles, wild roses and oak seedlings. Slowly the forest is reclaiming this land, and it only takes 10 years without attention before the land is unrecognisable. Now the land is used only by Farmer

Borselli's sheep and passing deer and boar, who rarely stop for a chat.

I ran the lawnmower around the lawn, for the first time this year, after removing a large number of rocks and stones buried in the soil. These will be put aside for a long wall we are planning to build along the drive. Earlier I spotted sweet violets and lesser celandine growing near the garden and I cleared the stream which had diverted down an old road and was eroding it, everywhere here are old roads, well worth taking a metal detector to, while the whole layout of the mountainside, which is woodland, grew over what were once poor quality farmed terraces. I don't plan to graft a living off the land, as was done here in years past, but semi-landscaped olive groves would be a wonderful boundary between the garden and the forests.

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The Mystery of the Birds Dropping

March 6th 2004 – Despite our best endeavours we are not doing well encouraging birdlife. Last week we put up a bird feeder but I am sad to say that not one bird has been seen partaking of this bounteous feast, it is almost tempting to put up a web cam just in case, but the fact is the level of nuts in the feeder has not gone down at all.

More worrying is the strange case of the three birds we found by the house. On Tuesday my Father found a pair of dead blackbirds on the terrace in the morning. Their bodies were still warm, despite the sharp cold, and rigor mortis has not set in. They were not in a flying position, instead looking as if they were sitting on a branch one moment but fell down dead the next. We speculated on whether they died of cold, but dismissed that as they would have died the night before, when it was much colder; nor could they have flown into the glass wall of the loggia, as they were in a sitting position when we found them dead. There are no cats locally and no evidence of fowl play.

We were mystified enough when this morning, Saturday, my Mother found the tiny body of a Blue Tit in the courtyard. Again, it looked as if was just sitting on a branch when it died and it simply fell out of the sky. We hope this will stop soon and to make up for it I hung the two birdhouses on oak trees on the slope just above the courtyard. I'd be grateful if any readers have hints on what caused the birds to die and why. In the meantime, we hope the birds start enjoying the free food and accommodation.

I have just finished reading 'The Principles of Gardening', by Hugh Johnson. Hugh Johnson is more familiar persuading us to pour wine down our throats, but in the daytime he has learnt much about gardening. It was given to me by my Father when we lived in Scotland and we planned to build a completely different type of garden, but those plans failed and only now have I properly read the book, fourteen years on. I recommend it for anyone interested in learning about the theory behind gardening or who wants to learn about the bigger picture of what you are trying to create, especially in terms of garden style. With this book behind me I can now start on the Royal Horticultural Encyclopaedia of Gardening, which will take a while, so I'll return to gardening books later this year.

The snow stayed down most of this week and it was very cold, now it is cold and damp, as La Doccia has been covered in mist all day long. I laid down fertiliser around most of the garden and also built a

new enlarged compost heap. I took a leaf out of Lombardo's book here, by making the posts of the compost heap myself. Finding some long branches I sawed them to size and used an axe to sharpen them before drilling them into the ground and hammering them down. The crocuses, in our Porcupine-Free-Zone, are flowering and bulbs are appearing everywhere. A Porcupine ate the Iris bulbs in the herbaceous border, so we are not, to say the least, sharing Christmas cards this year. In the meantime, we are hoping the birds start eating our food and enjoy themselves here.

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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>

Villas In Tuscany

By Giovanni Marchi

Travelling through Tuscany can be a very stressful experience, in spite of what all romantic books and guides tell you, if you do not know where to find that great spot or restaurant or museum you are looking for.

The first thing to do when planning a trip to Tuscany is to plan what are the things you would like to do when you are there. Are you looking for relax and just a hint of culture among strolls? Or would you like a full immersion in Tuscany's cultural heritage? Or would you like something in the middle?

It is important to know this because from here you will be able to choose the type of accommodation you want to be in. There are some villas which give you the true Tuscan country experience with 360 degrees breathtaking views, gardens that allow you to spend a whole week with bare feet, far from any other man-made landmark. Then there are villas at one mile from the nearest town, where you can still enjoy lots of privacy, but at the same time allow you to enjoy quick trips to nearby interesting spots.

What is the size of your group? Is it a large size group? Couple? Villas for large groups are common in Tuscany, but you have to get the budget right! At times very large villas can be too expensive, so the best thing is to rent a farmhouse composed of separate apartments in Tuscany. Lots of privacy for a small price!!!

After you have picked your lodging in Tuscany, plan a route towards the nearby cities. The good thing about Tuscany is that it has plenty of small towns within one hour from almost any location, so you will be able to enjoy different kinds of food and wines in just one week's time.

Do not worry about the activities to do in Tuscany. Almost all owners can speak decent English and they are the best source of information on how to spend your holiday in Tuscany and have fun. They will tell you what to do, whether you want to hike, horseback ride, go hot air ballooning, taste wine, participate to cultural tours, cooking courses, concerts, or anything you like!

I love travelling to Tuscany and giving advice to who shares this passion.



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