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**The Journal of a Gardener in Tuscany – October 2004**

**By Rupert Mayhew**

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October 14 2004 - We set up the greenhouses for the summer shrubs, sadly removing still flowering geraniums, the gardenia, several hostas and the bougainvillea into a greenhouse and leaving many empty spaces around the garden, places that provided so much colour during the summer.

All the above flowers had excellent summers and luckily most will survive the winter in the greenhouse, last year we had a pretty cold winter, with a month of snow, but they all fought through, the only losses really coming from geraniums, such is their more delicate nature, and so we expect some to die and others to survive. The weather this month has so far been excellent and we have enjoyed plenty of sunny days with the temperature reaching well into the 70s. We haven't moved the lemon tree inside yet as a result, one frost will kill it, so I have been advised, but a little cool weather will do it the world of good.

Last spring we repotted a number of hydrangeas from a flowerbed, along with some roses, that received little sun and was shaded by the lavenderia and the house. For 4 years they struggled in this flowerbed but after repotting the survivors, and yes some did die, those survivors have flourished in pots around the garden and are now bursting out of their pots. We have started repotting them in earnest and are already thinking about permanent positions for them, somewhere where they can enjoy some light and sun.

I plan to plant some Virginia creeper where they were, Virginia creeper doesn't mind east or north facing walls, no matter what your gardening books tell you, and they would love such a spot. The trouble is, Virginia creeper is difficult to find out here and not stocked in most garden centres. Despite an impressive red climber just below the Ponte Vecchio in Florence, which I noted today.

Being a farm, as we are, it is our duty to produce products typical to the region, and what is more, I began to feel sorry for the old vines growing along the lawn which were once part of an old vineyard to supply the monks who farmed here some well earned pleasure. So I resurrected seven vines, half which were embedded in the soil, and placed stakes alongside them and trained them up. They are still small but from good stock, and although having stakes with vines growing at the edge of the lawn, isn't

typical in an English lawn, it is a very typical sight around a Tuscan house. And of course, we are a farm, and perhaps as early as next year it will provide us with some grapes for the house. The grapes we grow here are very tasty but rather small, a direct opposite to grapes from the greengrocer. But no winemaking for now, I'll leave that for the professionals.

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October 29th 2004. The vines I mentioned earlier this month are already doing very well and recovering surprisingly quickly, tenacious plants, they are, and despite being strimmed countless times they are already growing fast and showing how deep their roots are.

Growing fast here is easy at the moment, if you are in the garden, so to speak. The weather is

unseasonably mild and as pleasant as May, even more pleasant in fact, as this May was full of nasty storms. Our gardener, Antonio, says the good weather will continue until Christmas, he uses unconventional weather forecasting techniques usually out of date but often surprisingly correct. So the grass is growing fast as is everything else, below tree level, which is enjoying a particularly good second spring.

In the garden we are repotting and planting. The geraniums are still out in the pots as it is so mild, and we have held off taking in the lemon tree too for the same reason. We pruned the lavender beds, a pretty aromatic job as gardening jobs go, and are about to start cutting back the climbing roses, they are buckling under their own weight. My father has done much of the work in the garden this month on account of being at school in Florence, school is now finished but I can now remember why I was such a bad pupil all those years ago, never listening to the teacher, instead always looking out of the window day dreaming.

So I'd come home late afternoon, still with some time to `play', and out I'd be in the garden, `playing' in my own way. I am going through the orchard and the fruit trees around the house, pruning them, cutting away dead wood and reshaping the tree so it looks a little more natural. Most cherry trees are full of dead wood, even the young trees, and it seems what they say about fruit trees being susceptible to disease is true, they really are. And what a shame as, apart from olive trees, they are the most useful trees we have around here. Great for jam, flowers (which olive trees aren't) brandy, (if they are apple or plum) and, sadly when they die, for firewood. So there'll be some fruit tree planting coming up in the next few years.

The lawn is clogging up the lawnmower with rich wet green grass and it is growing fast. As for the grass seeds I planted earlier this month, I'm sad to say it seems the termites got them, but later, when the grass started to shoot, they rejected the seeds. I found, strangely, several piles of grass seeds, shooting, on top of each other near termite holes. Very annoying but it must have been a bit of a surprise for the termites to discover their winter food supply starting to grow in their nest. That'll teach them!

Sadly though, the lawn still needs more grass seeds, so once more I try again.

Rupert Mayhew recently moved to Tuscany, Italy, from London. He runs an expanding agriturismo and this new role includes the task of creating a garden out of what is now mountainside.

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## **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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