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The Journal of a Gardener in Tuscany – September 2004

By Rupert Mayhew

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Sept 14 2004 - As the good weather continued through early September the lawn grew steadily browner and browner. Yet the nights are already shorter and just when it seemed the last of the lawn would die the heavens opened and rained, and this time it rained for more than just an hour. It was a classic end of summer, season changing afternoon.

As ever it was sunny all morning, then cloudy, and just as we were finishing lunch it rained, and this rain came down in sheets. It washed all the dust from the road, built up over the summer, down the stone staircase went the biblical foods and onto the terrace, the silty soil it left there will be great for the roses, but large amounts were left on the stairs and it took several hours cleaning the next day to clear it all up. The soil on the sloping rose bed was washed down to the bottom and eventually right over the wall and onto the ground below. This isn't so good as this good soil is lost and the ground beneath it was made up of gravel but now is a mix of gravel and mud and very difficult to remove.

Antonio and I spent almost an hour moving soil from the bottom of the rose bed back to the top to create a trench to allow future silt to collect. Elsewhere the tropical rain washed much of the soil off the lawn sloping up to the cottages. Parts of this lawn, which I am working hard on as it was created by a JCB, lost all the topsoil, which would have washed down to the better parts of the lawn, so that isn't such a bad loss. All in all several hours were taken up cleaning up after the rain. We have so little rain all summer the lawn eventually dies, and when it does rain, it washes all the topsoil off the lawn. So more work and planning is required on the lawn front.

The dahlias had a second wind and the herbaceous border lasted well all summer, as did most of the geraniums and hydrangeas. The oleanders clearly need work but overall in Tuscany, if not at La Doccia, they flower all summer long, through the dry spell, and though we may be a little too high for oleander I plan to experiment with some next spring.

Subsequent rain means the second spring is starting, the weather is cooling, there is dew on the ground and soon everything will start to grow. Summer here is almost like a small winter in terms of the garden. For the most intense period, perhaps six weeks, the garden shuts up shop and waits until the

weather cools down a little. Most sensible I have to say, I wish I could have done the same but alas there was other work to do.

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Sept 29 2004 - Manic grass growth means I am mowing the lawn twice a week, to keep it short, and for the second time this year it looks like a closely cropped English lawn - in places. In other places, where they were infamously strimmed while I was in London, there is nothing so now it the time to apply a fertiliser rich in potassium and phosphorus to the lawn as well as a spot of reseeding and top dressing.

I started reseeding yesterday and an hour or so after finishing I walked over the area and notices busy

termites everywhere, and they were running around with my beautiful grass seed. How dare they! I shouted at them, to no avail, and so to get them back I started applying fertiliser, lets see if they like that instead. I am not sure what they plan with my grass seed, but it was all gone the next day. If they plan to build something they may find it will soon turns to grass, so much for termite engineering.

I will reseed the areas I reseeded but this will coincide with top dressing and fertilising and most likely happen in the rain, which should act as a trigger immediately setting off the grass seed. The soluble fertiliser will react with the rain meaning the ground is covered in chemicals and the sandy top dressing with then cover the grass seed. This is the plan, tomorrow I will execute it as the forecast is for rain.

The roses are all flowing again, some roses have flowered all summer but this batch will be much better, but not as good as the first crazy flowering for most of June and July. The rosemary `hedge' I planted has also mostly survived, a few died of drought, easy to miss with the rest of the garden, and I reckon Antonio strimmed one but hasn't admitted to it. Luckily about ten of the rosemary cuttings I took are looking very healthy and have taken off. I will plant these in the next week or so.

Those that have survived are growing very energetically. This could be as, when planting them, to compensate for the poor soil, I dug a hole twice as deep as was necessary and filled it with a mix of compost, moisture retaining peat, bone meal and fertiliser. This encourages the roots to dig deeper away from its own root ball. This also seems to have worked well for the pink thing and the yellow thing my Father asked me to plant in March. We don't know what these are, my Father forgot and I haven't identified them, and in fact they are both green anyhow now they have stopped flowering, but they look very happy on a south facing slope. It is a good method to use when replanting in areas with poor soil, such as we have.

I visited the compost heap, a social call, to see how it was getting on. All summer we have been filling it with kitchen waste and some grass cuttings and soon we will add leaves to the collection. I am pleased to say the compost is a very unpleasant place, smelly, full of horrid looking insects and their seed/larvae and all sorts of other nasties. This, apparently, is a `good thing', said Marie the cook, I just hope the roses agree with me in January.

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@ladocciawelcomes.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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