

SAPIENZA UNIVERSITY OF ROME

# ROME AND ITS BOTANIC GARDENS

*HISTORY AND EVENTS*



*edited by Fabio Attorre and Franco Bruno*



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In copertina: *Villa Corsini Botanic Garden Entrance*. Drawing by Henrike Berg Panà (modified)

*To Pietro Romualdo Pirotta*

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## INDEX

### *HISTORY (Paola Lanzara, Paolo Benedetto Nocchi)*

Ancient tradition .....	11
The monastic garden .....	12
Nicolas III <i>Pomerium</i> .....	16
Nicolas V <i>Hortus Herbarum</i> .....	20
<i>Horto de' Semplici</i> and the Academic Teaching .....	23
Michele Mercati and the Natural Collections .....	29
The Academy of Lincei and the progress of Botany .....	30
The garden in the first half of the 17 <sup>th</sup> century .....	38
Plants of the New World and exotic Collections .....	41
The Medical Garden of the Roman Archiginnasium.....	45
The scientific fame of the Garden under G.B. Triumphetti .....	46
The <i>Hortus Romanus</i> and the tournefortian system.....	49
The 'Orto bottanico' at 'Longara' .....	52
The Botanic Garden as Natural Museum .....	56
The french projects and a Botanical Garden that never existed.....	60
The Botanic Garden returns to the Convent.....	64
P.R. Pirotta founds the Botanical Institute in 'Via Milano' and the Garden at Villa Corsini .....	68
Villa Riario-Corsini .....	71
The artistic presences.....	80
The <i>Horti Getae</i> .....	80
The structure and the entities composition of the garden until 1927 .....	81
 <i>THE MODERN GARDEN</i>	
Variations of Diversity in one hundred Years of management of the Botanic Garden of Rome in the Gardens of Villa Riario Corsini (1883-1983) ( <i>Franco Bruno</i> ).....	89
Structure and composition of the garden after 1990 ( <i>Franco Bruno</i> ) .....	94
Botanic Gardens today ( <i>Fabio Attorre &amp; Giulia Torta</i> ).....	117
 Bibliography .....	126
Editors' biography .....	129

## INTRODUCTION

*Towards the end of the 1800s, the palace of the Corsini family and its garden were acquired by the Italian State. The complex had undergone a radical transformation in the mid-eighteenth century, when Cardinal Neri Maria Corsini had entrusted the renovation of this property to the architect Ferdinando Fuga. In this occasion the palace was transformed from Renaissance to eighteenth-century, and the surrounding area was enriched by a magnificent set of low buildings, fountains and ornamental architecture that became the backdrop for laurel and Italian gardens.*

*When the first director of the Botanic Garden, Pietro Romualdo Pirota, took possession of this area (1883), it was already in its fourth official location. In fact, the Botanic Garden of Rome has a history full of vicissitudes, concerning both the scientific institution and the area of residence itself. On these tracks moves the research "Rome and its Botanical Garden", to remember both the history of the Botanical Garden at Villa Corsini, and the origins of this institution, starting from the first Hortus Simplicium of 1278. In Rome, in fact, the Botanic Garden is the heir of the Viridarium, the section of the Vatican gardens in which the papal archiater (chief physician) cultivated medicinal plants. The first document on this institution is represented by the plaque, that today is in the "Sala dei Capitani" of the Capitoline Museums, which states that Pope Nicholas III, in 1278, had a sector of the garden built for this purpose. Nicholas V, in 1477, took an interest in its Viridaria and Pius V, in the 16th century, called the Tuscan physician Michele Mercati to direct the Vatican Garden. Since there was a collection of medicinal plants in the Vatican Garden, from which the university professors took the plants to show their students (Ostensiones simplicium), there was no immediate need in Rome for a university Botanic Garden, as instead was the case in other Italian cities, such as Padua and Pisa.*

*In fact, Botanic Gardens were created mainly for the cultivation of medicinal plants. Concentrating medicinal species in a single place of cultivation gave a series of remarkable advantages. First, it was not necessary to search for plants in nature, and this led to a considerable saving of time and, also, there was no risk of making mistakes by collecting plants that had no medicinal principles or, even worse, were poisonous. In fact, Francesco Bonafede, who taught medicine at the University of Padua, asked the city of Venice in 1543 to establish the first botanical garden in the world, not only to facilitate learning, but especially to improve the recognition of medicinal plants. The medical treatments of those times, in fact, more often led to deaths rather than to recoveries!*

*In the famous "De Materia Medica" by Dioscorides of the first century AD, in fact, to avoid any confusion the Author did not insert illustrations, but only very detailed descriptions of the plants (names, synonyms, areas of diffusion, as well as their properties, preparations, etc.). We must wait for the publication of the splendid Anicia Juliana Codex in 512 AD to see full-page illustrations of the plants of Dioscorides' herbarium. For the next thousand years only copies upon copies of these illustrations were made, and in many different languages, so that slowly the illustrations no longer corresponded to the habitus of the medicinal plants, thus causing confusion in their recognition. On the contrary, being able to observe these plants all together in a controlled and circumscribed environment, as in a Botanic Garden, would have facilitated the teaching.*

*Even though the University of Rome was the first to establish the Chair of Botany during the papacy of Leo X in 1513, it had to wait until September 15 1660 for the creation of a proper university Botanic Garden, behind the Acqua Paola fountain on the Janiculum hill by Alexander VII. It was during this period that Botany and Medicine took different paths, and Botanic Gardens soon became the ideal location place for the numerous plants discovered and brought back from the explorations around the world. From gardens of medicinal plants*

*they soon became experimental places not only for the acclimatization of exotic plants, that the aristocratic families competed with each other to have in their gardens, but especially for the systematic study of plants, a role which has been preserved until today, and which has led to the modern development of Botany.*

*From the Janiculum hill, in 1820 the Botanic Garden was moved to the nearby Palazzo Salviati, then, after the unification of Italy in 1873, it was moved to the Viminale hill (in the Garden of the Convent of S. Lorenzo in Panisperna) and finally, in 1883, it was established at the Villa Corsini. Currently, the Botanical Garden of Villa Corsini is an integral part of the Sapienza University of Rome; it occupies an area of about 12 hectares and in addition to its institutional museum characteristics – it contains important collections - it represents the seat of scientific research and permanent environmental education in the heart of Trastevere, one of the oldest neighborhoods of Rome. Even if the current location is inadequate for a modern Botanic Garden, nevertheless it can attract many visitors, facilitating an awareness about the importance of scientific investigations for the preservation of the magnificent and irreplaceable diversity of plants, so that this awareness may be passed on to the future generations.*

*Fabio Attorre & Franco Bruno*

