



NEW ROOTS SICILY ON SHOW

Tim Richardson visits a conceptual garden festival in the Mediterranean

The ominously smoking Mount Etna provides a dramatic backdrop for a new biennial conceptual garden festival in Sicily. Radicepura, pronounced "Radeechypoorra" (the name translates as "pure new roots"), comprises some 14 show gardens created by an international roster of designers, plus sculptural installations, demonstration plots and a nascent botanical garden (to be opened next year). It's a fun show, with the gardens laid out on the hillside as a kind of labyrinth for visitors to explore – though preferably not in the midday heat. Sensibly, the gardens remain open until 7pm and night-time visits are scheduled for weekends.

The festival was the brainchild of Mario Faro and his colleagues at Piante Faro, a huge nursery that supplies landscape companies across Europe. The business, begun by Mario's father, has expanded recently to encompass a vineyard, a boutique hotel and events such as conferences held in the massive conservatory on the elegantly designed Radicepura site.

The high level of diversification can be startling in some ways, as I discovered last year when I was invited to Radicepura to speak at a conference. To the astonishment of myself and the other delegates, the sober conference venue – the palm-filled conservatory – was transformed in the evening into a massive disco, filled with flashing lights, thumping house music and several thousand young Sicilians hopping about.

One of my dancing companions on that occasion was Alfio Bonmano, a Sicilian-Australian land artist whom I visited again this year from the top of the largest installation on the site, a 50ft-high drum-shaped tower made from scaffolding poles by

French designer Michel Péna. Bonmano has contributed two artworks to the show, including *Refuge for Lizards*, a striking sculpture made from dead vine plants, which is the first thing visitors to the festival see.

Certainly the most spectacular contribution is a massive "floating" garden created by François Abélanet, which consists of several dozen irregularly shaped planting panels raised up on metal poles. Viewed from an overhead platform, the disparate pieces of this jigsaw coalesce into one scene. The piece is titled *Anamorphose* in reference to the Renaissance perspectival technique in which "secret" elements could be hidden in paintings.

The Mediterranean-themed planting of this garden – thymes, sages and other herbs, with orange marigolds for colour – will not be exciting to British gardeners used to a high level of horticultural sophistication. But this is a festival based on ideas as opposed to plantsmanship, so perhaps expectations should be adjusted accordingly.

One exception to this is James Basson's contribution, which takes as its theme the myth of the nymph Arethusa and the river god Alpheus. Basson has created a kind of

sacred grove using local plants, including mature specimens of the kermes oak, and flowers such as star-shaped *Asphodelus tenuifolius* and *Genista aetnensis*, the Mount Etna broom. The design feels a bit cramped in the space allotted to it, while Kamelia Bin Zaal (another name familiar from the Chelsea Flower Show) has had more success with a beguiling garden shaded by canvas canopies, a take on the Islamic rill garden filled with white-flowered plants.

My own favourite garden, titled "Mediterranean



Identity" in tune with the overall theme of the show, was a collaboration between a large group of students from Bologna University. But in this case too many cooks have not spoiled the broth (or bolognese sauce), because this design is perfectly executed. Three gnarled olive trees shade a planting of gaura, stipa grasses and myrtle, with low stone walls adding a diagonal emphasis. At the end of the garden is a distorted cube structure containing stylised human figures and ripped-up books (a reference to the "evils of globalisation").

A welcome addition to the roster of international garden festivals, Radicepura has put down its roots in the fertile soil of Mount Etna, and will surely thrive.

The festival runs until October 21 (radicepura.com)



New perspective: *Anamorphose*; top, Kamelia Bin Zaal's design

MAGE/MAGNANNE MAERUS



TOMATILLO

I stopped growing tomatillos when my lack of imagination about bringing out the best of them exceeded my patience. I consigned them to the box marked "Disappointing Tomato Impersonators" – until I ate them in a blissful salsa at Thomasina Miers' Wahaca. Once again they adorn this year's planting plan.

Aka "Mexican green tomatoes", tomatillos are an essential ingredient in Mexican cooking as they have both the flavour and texture to stand up to robust ingredients. That hint of sourness and their firm texture suits a salsa, although cooking develops the flavour further: try them where you'd use green tomatoes. When fully ripe the fruits are sweet-sharp and are good straight off the plant, too.

Where many "interesting" plants are tricky little devils, tomatillos are easy. They thrive more readily outdoors than a tomato, need no staking or pinching out, they grow quickly, tolerate cold spells

and are highly productive. Their yellow-purple flowers give way to green fruit encased in a papery lantern. This eventually parts to allow the fruit to darken in colour.

HOW TO GROW

SOW Undercover in modules, in March-April, potting into 4in pots when 2in tall. Plant out late May, in full sun, 2½ft from neighbours. Plant at least two for pollination and three plants should feed a family.

CARE Plants cascade when around 12in tall, producing shoots that bear most fruit, so give them space to spread. Water well and feed with tomato feed/ comfrey tea once a fortnight from flowering.

HARVEST Pick fruits the size of a table tennis ball, usually early August-late September.



OYSTER PLANT

A small confession: I had two oyster plants (*Mertensia maritima*) about six years ago and, in a wave of killing a number of delicats, I saw them both off and didn't replace them. This says more about me than them.

Having eaten oyster plant as part of very possibly the most joyous meal of my life at Raymond Blanc's Le Manoir Aux Quat Saisons, I now have three plants newly arrived from the nursery, and some seed

to sow in autumn. I intend to give them what little care they need. A member of the borage family, this gorgeous low-growing succulent

has silver-green leaves that carry an extraordinary, oyster-like flavour. I wonder how I might have caused two to die, because the oyster plant is an easy perennial: give it sun and the sharp drainage that mimics its natural habitat in northern seashore gravels, and it'll thrive, especially in a pot. The flowers are also delicious, carrying the oyster flavour of the leaves with a touch more of that familiar seaside ozone.

HOW TO GROW

GROW Sow seeds outside in autumn, or start with young plants and grow in a well-drained container in full sun.

CARE Water occasionally through any dry spells.

HARVEST Pick young leaves – no more than 10 per cent at once – from March until October, allowing the plant to recover before re-harvesting.

The flowers are delicious too, pick June-October.



a half-an-inch compost covering. Germination 1-2 weeks. Transplant to part-shade when seedlings are about 1in tall.

SOW Fortnightly for a successional harvest.

CARE Water frequently and mulch in summer to prevent bolting.

HARVEST Pick the young tender leaves in waves, to allow others to form. Once flowering starts, cease harvesting as the leaves become increasingly bitter.

Stems should be cut when around 8in in length – don't let them grow too large, as they lose tenderness and become stringy.

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