Archaeological Evidence for Plants in Ancient Vesuvian Gardens

The archaeological evidence for plants in ancient Campania is extremely rich and varied. Nothing comparable has been preserved at any other ancient site.

The plant material pictured in the wall paintings forms a unique chapter in the history of garden plants. Beginning in 1955, when I first started working at Pompeii, my husband photographed every scrap of plant material that we could find, both in the garden and within the house. By painting the picture of a garden on one or more of the walls that enclosed the garden, a modest garden was made to appear larger. Behind a painted fence, plants, trees, birds, statues, fountains and pools too large for the actual garden could be pictured. I have discussed a total of 145 such paintings (including the 19 known elsewhere in the Roman Empire) together with photographs and bibliographies, in the second volume of my book on the gardens of the Vesuvian area (Jashemski, 1991, p. 313-392). Many of the photographs show garden paintings no longer in existence, or barely visible today. A few houses had interior rooms painted to appear as a garden. Many small motifs picture bowls of assorted fruit, or birds with flowers or fruit. Dr. Frederick G. Meyer of the National Arboretum, Washington D.C. has been working with me for many years, identifying the plants in the wall painting as well as the carbonized fruits, seeds and vegetables found in my excavations. We have completed a descriptive catalogue of over 70 such plants. Other scientists who have been working with me have identified the birds, animals and fish in the wall paintings.

In my many seasons of work in Italy, I have examined every garden that has been excavated in the Vesuvian sites. I have also had the good fortune of excavating many different types of gardens and cultivated lands (34 in all) at Pompeii, Oplontis (modern Torre Annunziata), and Boscoreale. Only excavation can tell us how a garden actually looked in antiquity. After the eruption, when the plants and roots decayed, the root cavities were

gradually filled with the lapilli (pumice about the size of peach pits) that covered the site. We empty the lapilli out of the root cavities with special tools, reinforce the cavities with heavy wire, and fill them with cement. After three or more days when the cement has hardened, and the soil around it is removed, we have the shape of the ancient root. If we are fortunate we find soil contours, carbonized or partially preserved stems, or roots, ancient pollen, seeds, fruit, bacteria, even insects, all of which have been identified by the many scientists who have been working with me. Garden archaeology is a complex discipline that requires the cooperation of many scientists. Their findings, which pertain to specific gardens, are found in my two volumes. Volume 2 contains a description of every garden that has been excavated in the Vesuvian area total of 625, together with photographs, plans and bibliographies (Jashemski, 1979; 1991, p. 21-32). Much of the evidence collected pertains to the entire region. This research will be presented in a volume now nearing completion, *The Natural History of Pompeii and the Other Vesuvian Sites*, edited by Dr. Meyer and myself.

At Ravello, several gardens and planted areas were discussed that illustrate the different kind of evidence that we have found, which tells us what had been planted in these sites. The peristyle garden in the House of Polybius (IX.XIII.1-3) which I excavated in 1973 was the first peristyle garden to be excavated using the latest scientific techniques. It was a great surprise to find five huge trees, also many smaller ones, and a few bushes in this small garden. It has previously been assumed the peristyle gardens had all been planted with low formal plantings. I subsequently excavated seven more peristyle gardens and I found that only one of these had been formally planted: a lovely little formal peristyle garden in the southeast part of the city (I.XII.11) (Fig. 1). I later found a much more elegant formal garden at the rear of a beautiful three story house known as the House of the Bracelet, or the House of the Wedding of Alexander (VI, insula occidentalis, 42) on the west edge of the city. It was built over the city wall after it was no longer needed when Pompeii became a Roman city. The walls of the *diaeta* or garden room, which looked out on the garden, were decorated with the most beautiful and well preserved garden paintings ever found in a Vesuvian site.

The formal garden was primarily a green garden. The major plants-clipped box, ivy, laurel, myrtle, oleander and rosemary were evergreen and produced beautiful gardens the year round. There would be an accent of colour when these bloomed. Roses were also important, but flowers played a minor role in Roman gardens.

In the Garden of Hercules we found very complicated and unique soil contours, which divided the garden into many beds on different levels. Those on the north were higher than those on the south, thus conforming

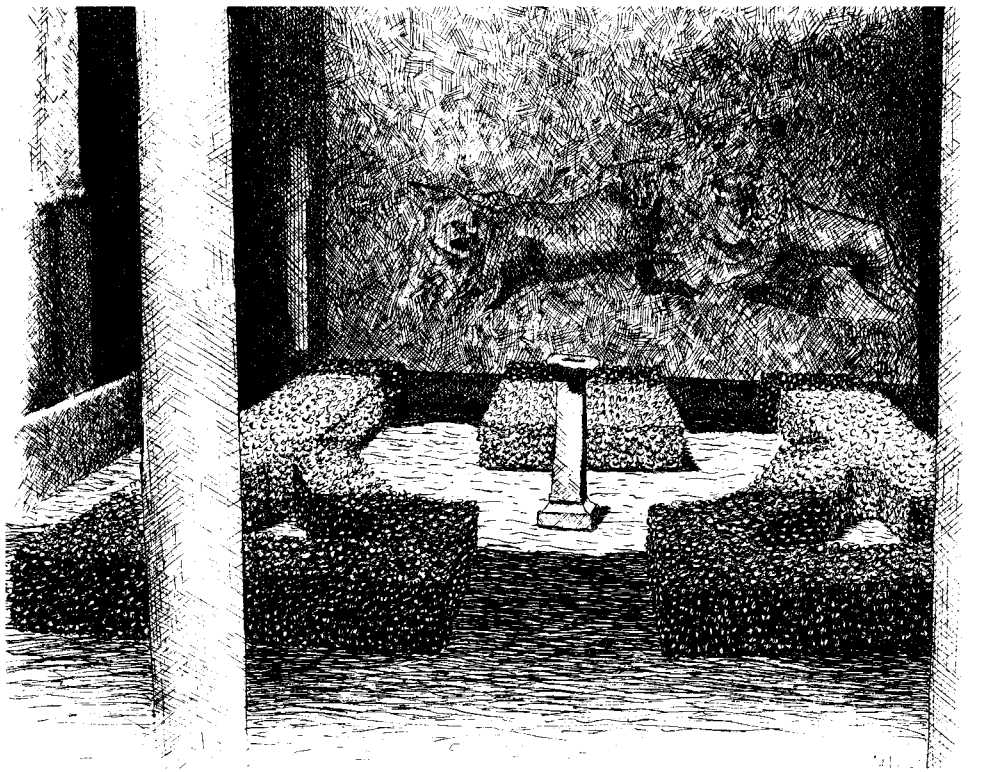

Fig. 1. Formal plantings in small formal garden. Pompeii I.XII.11. Drawing by Luc Herbots.

to the natural slope of the land. The water channels around the beds were higher than the beds on the north; those in the south lower. In this way, water collected from the roof of the modest house, as well as water carried into the garden, could be led first along the walls and from there into the garden. We found one large root cavity which appeared to be that of an olive tree, a few cavities of smaller trees, but most of the cavities were those of stakes. These would have supported the frames which were covered with fiber amts to furnish protection for the young plants in the bed. These were obviously annual vegetables or flowers, which were grown for part of the year. Perhaps flowers were grown for making perfume or unguents, for this was an important industry in ancient Pompeii. Many small glass perfume bottles were found in this garden and in the house. Olive oil was an important base used in making perfumed oil. This, a large olive tree would have provided. Unfortunately this garden and others that I have excavated have been replanted without regard to the evidence that we found.

Carbonized plant materials, soil contours, planting patterns, root cavities, pollen and other evidence enable us to picture what was grown in the farm land of the *Villa rustica* at Boscoreale, which I excavated during the summers

of 1980, 1982 and 1983. This is the first farm land to be excavated in a Vesuvian site.

No garden or cultivated land has been found in the *Villa rustica* at Oplontis but several cubic meters of carbonized plant materials, apparently hay collected in a vineyard, furnish important new information about ancient plants. The importance of this material is shown by the fact that of the 130 plants identified in this hay by Professor Massimo Ricciardi and Giuseppa Grazia Aprile, 81 species, 37 genera, and one family have been added to the list of 408 plants previously known from first century B.C. (Riciardi and Aprile, 1988, p. 323).

The luxurious villa at Oplontis, believed to have belonged to Poppaea, the wife of the emperor Nero, thus far has 13 gardens which I have excavated. The evidence for plant materials found in two great exterior gardens was discussed in detail: the garden at the rear of the villa with an architectural layout that mirrored the architecture of the villa itself and the impressive sculpture garden along the east side of the Olympic size swimming pool. The great exterior villa gardens that reached out to the sea in front of the villa and to the mountains in the rear, are unique and unlike anything found in city gardens.

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