

“ Visiting gardens tells you so much more than just horticulture. It is a fascinating way to observe people, their culture and lives ”



Monty's new TV series takes him from plush palazzos in Venice to sun-bleached gardens on the Greek islands

The road less travelled

Monty seeks out the lesser-known gardens of Europe, down the dramatic Adriatic coast, in the footsteps of artists, aristocrats and oligarchs - exploring what gardening means in different cultures

PHOTOS: BRZDANA PROJECTIONS, MIKE ROBINSON

Monty on the road to Plitvička in Croatia, in search of wildflowers



▲ High-end design by Fernando Caruncho makes a bold statement



▲ Water as far as the eye can see, at the Rothschild garden, under a Corfu sun



ABOVE Filming in a small allotment, the Orto del Campanile, in the bustle of Venice
LEFT Monty explores Venice's iconic St Mark's Square in a rare moment of quiet
RIGHT Recording the famous façades on the Grand Canal from the barge the TV crew used as its base



My Adriatic album

Snapshots from Monty's Covid-hit year of filming



▲ The Croatian version of a Paradise Garden, by YouTube gardener Ante Karanušić



▲ Exploring a private, coastal garden on the Croatian island of Lopud



▼ A hidden gem by the Grand Canal in Venice – the Renaissance Palazzo Nani Bernardo



▲ Shipping wealth of Stavros Niarchos funds one of Europe's biggest roof gardens



▼ Gardens and cloisters on the Venetian island of San Giorgio Maggiore

Last May, on the very first day that travel was permitted, I set off from my bubble at Longmeadow to start filming a series on Adriatic gardens. This had been delayed by a year due to the pandemic and during that time I had barely left the garden at all, other than to take the dogs for a walk in empty fields. So Heathrow was a culture shock (and a fiasco – we weren't allowed to check in because a form had been filled in an hour too early, falling just outside the 24-hour window). So, off to a hotel and another flight the next day, this time involving a change and innumerable checks on paperwork before finally starting to film – a day behind schedule.

As well as a terrible start, the whole experience was a hassle. Everywhere we went there were different interpretations of the required Covid paperwork plus a few deeply invasive and unpleasant PCR tests on top of the ones back home and, of course, the obligatory 10 days quarantining on return.

But... it was a joy to be out and about and experiencing new places, seeing different ways of gardening and, having spent the previous year only filming with robot cameras, working with a live crew again.

In the series, I travel from Venice to the small Greek island of Hydra, going down the Adriatic coast from Trieste, through Croatia to Corfu and then across to Athens, the Peloponnese and finally across the

water to Hydra. These are not places where you would normally set out to visit gardens – which was the main attraction for me. Venice is hardly known as a garden city, while Croatia and Greece may be glorious holiday spots but certainly aren't renowned for gardens. But I have learnt, after circling the globe visiting gardens for the past 15 years, that visiting gardens tells you so much more than just horticulture. It is a fascinating way to observe people, their culture and lives. Sometimes unspectacular

we were there. This normally transports building materials around the city but being eminently manoeuvrable, we could get under the lowest bridge and into the smallest back canal. You only see me and the boatman in the footage but in fact it was big enough and comfortable enough for the whole crew – which, with local fixers and guides, amounted to eight of us plus all our kit, so became our floating base.

Had it not been for Covid, we would have filmed more in the Veneto, the area around

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or even, by our own measures, very ordinary gardens can be inspiring.

Venice was sublimely beautiful, and its gardens fascinating – not least because of the importance of small, private gardens in a very densely populated and packed city with very few public green spaces – which is increasingly relevant in today's world. My favourites were a small allotment made on an old rubbish dump at the base of a huge campanile (or bell tower), and the recently restored Giardini Reali, right next door to St Mark's Square.

Our filming trip in Venice was enhanced by the use of a cargo barge for the 12 days

Venice where there are numerous gardens, many attached to grand summer villas and palaces that wealthy Venetian merchants built in the 17th and 18th centuries. Indeed, on the first day of filming we arrived in Verona, ready to film at the Giusti garden (which I had visited in 2010 and loved) only to find it ravaged by a storm and very neglected, through both Covid and a family dispute over ownership. The upshot was that no filming got done that day. But we did visit the wonderful Villa Barbarigo near Padua. In my opinion, this is one of the finest surviving baroque gardens in the world and I would urge every garden lover to visit.

Coastal inspiration

I had never visited the Istrian and Croatian coast before, so travelling down from Trieste to Dubrovnik was a fascinating historical and social experience, even if there were few stand-out gardens along the way. The landscape is extraordinary, from the ancient olives on the impossibly stony island of Pag to the stupendous turquoise lakes and waterfalls of Plitvička, while the small private gardens showed a passion and enthusiasm that was deeply inspiring.

In Corfu, once an important Venetian stronghold, I visited the famous – but private – Rothschild garden and spent a day walking in wildflower meadows with Lee Durrell, Gerald Durrell's widow.

The two things that stood out most in Athens were the amazing Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center, with its vast roof garden – more than three times the size of the whole of Longmeadow – and, at the other extreme, a small allotment, right in the middle of the city, created in an old car park, to provide food for people who'd been through real economic hardship.

Sparoza, the garden created in the 1960s on the Attica plain by Jaqueline Tyrwhitt, and now the home of the Mediterranean Garden Society, was really special – showing that it was possible to have a beautiful garden adapted to the hostile environment of burning heat and summer drought.

PHOTOS: BBC/AHA PRODUCTIONS, ALEXANDRA HENDERSON

3 gardens not to be missed

Every region of the Adriatic coast has its own identity, and Monty's standout gardens reflect this diversity



Villa Barbarigo's formal baroque garden features statues, fountains, box hedges and ancient trees

▲ PROGRAMME 1: Venice & Veneto Villa Barbarigo, Veneto

This garden was made between 1664 and 1689 and remains almost unchanged. It was created after the owner vowed that if his family survived the terrible Venetian plague in 1631, he would make a garden as an act of thanksgiving.

The garden is a spiritual progression towards enlightenment. It is measured out in allées and paths of easy and honed proportion, carved out of box hedges exceptionally high, paths exceptionally right in their width and a balance of grass and sand everywhere, water stretching, arcing, looping, playing, teasing and cooling.

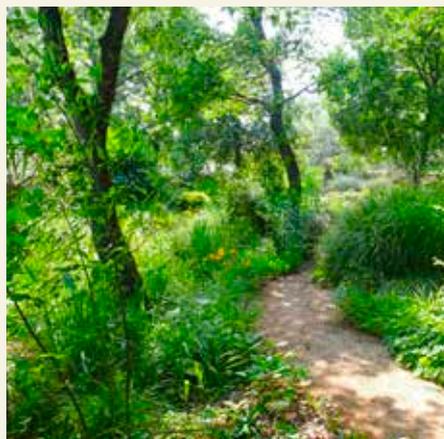
Despite the underlying spiritual earnestness, the journey to perfection did not exclude larks along the way. The garden entertains with a 400-year-old labyrinth and practical jokes such as jets of water triggered by pressure pads. I believe it to be one of the world's great gardens.

■ valsanzibogiardino.com Open Feb-Dec, €11

► PROGRAMME 3: Greece Sparoza, Attica province

Sparoza was 4 acres of barren hillside when Jacky Tyrwhitt bought it. Her initial planting required dynamite to blast holes big enough to plant cypresses and pines, to provide shelter from the drying winds. But she persevered, using native plants, and by 1983, when she died, she had created a superb garden. It is now the home of the Mediterranean Garden Society (MGS) and the current curator, Lucinda Willan, is carrying on Jacky's blend of deep botanical knowledge and indomitable spirit. It shows the huge range of plants, colours and textures that can thrive in even extreme climates and sites.

■ mediterraneangardensociety.org/sparoza.html Open by appt to MGS members



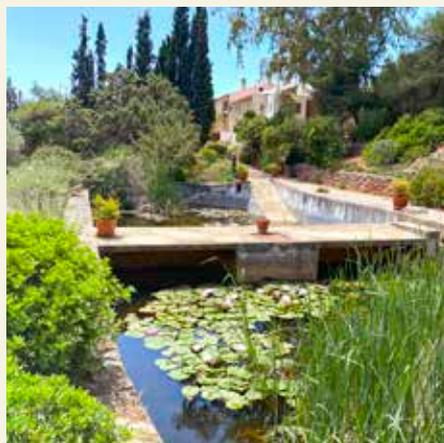
Davor's nursery garden has a relaxed style that Monty found inspirational

▲ PROGRAMME 2: Croatia Davor Cetina's nursery, Istria

Near the tip of the Istrian Peninsula, on the north Croatian coast, I visited a small nursery tucked away down a little lane. To be honest, we were all tired and the journey seemed long and rambling and I only half wanted to go. But it was stunning. Davor used to be a DJ but his passion – obsession – for plants took over and he set up his nursery about 12 years ago when in his early 20s, and now single-handedly produces over 20,000 plants a year. I have never visited any nursery that has such healthy, happy plants nor has such a good display garden. It is superb and I came away buoyed up with optimism and delight.

Sadly, most locals don't see the beauty in it, but the internet means he has a market across Europe. If he represents the future of Croatian horticulture, then it looks very bright indeed.

■ vrtlarikalici.jimdofree.com/eng



Sparoza, on the outskirts of Athens, is home to native Greek and other dry-climate plants



The Croatian Paradise Garden by Ante Karanušić is a world away from Monty's at Longmeadow

And then there was an extraordinary private garden, designed by one of my gardening heroes, Fernando Caruncho, where the garden literally takes extreme formality around the house high on a hill down to the very water's edge by the most astonishingly skilful use of stone, cloud pruning and choice of plants.

Then we wound up – at last – in Hydra. Why Hydra? Because for the past six years I have been helping to create a garden there and have made dozens of visits in that time. It belongs to a friend, and I am doing it for the sheer pleasure of the experience – but it feels almost like a second home. This little island, where there are no cars, where the streets are narrow medieval lanes and everything, from fridges to olive trees, has to be transported up the hundreds of steps by mule, has taught me a huge amount about growing in a Mediterranean climate, of how much more nuanced and complicated it is than we tend to treat it and how it informs our own more northerly gardens as the climate changes.

So much for the journey, spread over three two-week trips, but in reality we had to film it completely back to front. Because Italy was in strict lockdown and we wanted to get Greek wildflowers, programme three, in Greece, was shot first, then the second along the Croatian coast, just a few weeks later in June, before a long gap to filming the opening programme location – Venice – last September. This made things tricky, not least because I never work from a script so only have a rough idea of what the previous programmes might include and yet it is put together as a journey. But we live in strange times and just to be able to do it at all was a privilege and, as ever, it has enriched my own life and garden so much. □

Watch Monty's journey

Monty Don's Adriatic Gardens is on Friday 7, 14 and 21 January at 8pm – and you can watch again on iPlayer at bbc.co.uk/programmes/m00135tz



PHOTOS: ALAMY/FABIO LOTTI; BBC/AHA PRODUCTIONS/MIKE ROBINSON; MONTY DON; LUCINDA WILLAN



NEXT MONTH Monty reveals the plight of pollinators – and why spring is the time to act