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Stage Actor Leads Union

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LIFE & PEOPLE

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Many people are looking for a way to connect to their Italian heritage, while also longing for a closer connection with their food and with the earth. What is now considered gourmet has always been a part of the Italian diet.

The Italian American Garden Project

SILVIA DONATI

Sustainability is not a new concept for the Italian gardener. It is a way of life. To shine a light on this way

of life, and its inherent wisdom, Mary Menniti founded the Italian Garden Project in 2010. The project documents the stories and traditional methods of Italian American gardeners across the United States.

Traditional Italian-American gardens were common in America throughout the 1900s, Mary says. Having visited gardens across the country, she points out how "wherever

PG. 2

L'EDITORIALE

Quel 'piccolo è bello' che rende l'Italia potenza senza pari

Ci sono i piccoli borghi che sono diventati l'espressione della bellezza paesaggistica nazionale. Sono realtà territoriali microscopiche, estremamente tipizzate e caratteristiche, che rappresentano il gusto sincero del Belpaese e il fascino dell'Italia nascosta, quella da scoprire e recuperare nella sua integrità, al di

PG. 23

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“Sustainability is not a new concept for the Italian gardener. It is a way of life”

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Italians settled, growing their own food was a priority for most.”

The Italian Garden Project started in Pittsburgh (PA), where it was based until last year when Mary began spending half of her time in Sacramento and the Bay area. “I love California!” she says. “The climate and terrain are so much more like Italy than in the East, and the grapes, olives and figs are everywhere! When I tell Californians what it takes to grow a fig tree in the Northeast, they can hardly believe it!”

Mary, what or who was the inspiration for your Italian Garden Project?

My inspiration for the project was my paternal grandfather Antonio [*Antonio Martone immigrated to the U.S. in 1912 at age 16 from Sant' Angelo d'Alife, province of Caserta, ed.*]. He had a large garden in the backyard of the house where I lived, just a few miles from his home. He spent all day, almost every day in that garden. I adored my grandfather and spent as much time with him as I could. I not only grew to admire his extensive gardening knowledge and his wise use of resources, but I sensed the immense satisfaction and contentment that he experienced in



Mary Menniti in her garden. Photo courtesy of Mary Menniti

his garden. He felt completely at home there, as though there was nowhere else on Earth he'd rather be. This is the same feeling I get from the gardeners who I visit for the project. The garden brings them great joy and fulfillment. It feeds not only their bod-

ies, but their souls as well.

Who are the gardeners behind The Italian Garden Project?

Most of the gardeners are Italian-born Americans who came to the U.S. after WWII and grew up in families that gardened

as a way of life. They survived, for the most part, on what they grew themselves or could sell from their gardens. Today, they continue to live much closer to the earth and more lightly on the earth than most anyone. I always

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say they are so old-school that they are cutting edge. They are living a lifestyle that many of us are trying to get back to. The modern American lifestyle has left us craving their simpler, less fragmented way of life.

Your work documenting Italian gardens has led to the first Italian American backyard vegetable garden being included in the Smithsonian's Archives of American Gardens. Can you talk about your collaboration with the Smithsonian Institute? What does it involve?

The garden of Giovanni and Maria Macchione in Sewickley, PA, was the first to be submitted for inclusion in the collection and is now preserved through photographs, sketches, written description and other details so that this information can be available to researchers and the general public now and in the future.

Another documentation of a Pittsburgh garden is underway. It will be completed and submitted later this year. We are currently in the process of identifying appropriate gardens for documentation in Brooklyn, Baltimore and Washington DC. We hope to begin several in California within the coming year. Our documentations are done primarily by volunteers who feel passionately about the need to preserve this important part of the Italian American experience.

The motto for The Italian Garden Project is "Nostalgia for Yesterday...Lessons for Today." What lessons can the traditional Italian American garden teach us?



Mariano Floro of Sewickley, PA, planting tomato plants that he grows from seed from his hometown of Falerna



Mary Menniti founded the Italian Garden Project to preserve the tradition of Italian American vegetable gardens

Lessons are everywhere in the Italian American garden, from the rain barrel connected to the downspout, to the hole dug for composting kitchen vegetable scraps, to the tomato stakes made from re-purposed rebar. Sustainability is not a new concept for the Italian gardener. It is a way of life. Heirloom seeds have been brought from Italy and saved from one season to the next for generations, not only preserving biodiversity, but cre-

ating continuity with the past, experiencing the identical flavors that their ancestors enjoyed. You can't eat much more "local" than your own backyard, and what is now considered gourmet, such as rapini, radicchio, and endive, have always been a part of the Italian diet. These lessons and more abound in the Italian American vegetable garden.

Is the traditional Italian American vegetable garden at risk? If so, what can be done to

keep the tradition alive?

Throughout the 1900s, traditional Italian-American vegetable gardens were so commonplace that we took them for granted. Unfortunately, there are now fewer and fewer every year. The gardeners are getting older and the tradition is not being passed down the way it had been for generations. Although the gardens won't exist in the same numbers or the same exact style, I do see great interest and enthusiasm for preserving the tradition in some way. I've found that many people are looking for a way to connect to their Italian heritage, while also longing for a closer connection with their food and with the earth. When reminded of their rich agricultural history and its relevance for today, they are inspired. They may decide to grow a fig tree, seek out heirloom seeds from family members, or try to find seed commercially for a particular tomato or squash they remember from childhood. One of the most rewarding parts of my work is when someone approaches me after one of my lectures, saying that I've inspired them to plant an Italian garden.

What resources would you recommend to someone wishing to start a vegetable garden in their backyard?

You can see many examples of classic Italian American vegetable gardens on our website www.TheItalianGardenProject.com, as well as watch video of the gardeners themselves. We will be adding new content on an ongoing basis to address all aspects of the traditional garden.

Also, many gardening organizations and clubs sponsor Vegetable Gardening 101 type

classes. There is a Master Gardener network available throughout the country to assist the home gardener with questions or problems, and of course there are dozens of online resources to address all aspects of gardening.

What advice do you have for someone living in an apartment in the city and wanting to have a vegetable garden?

Adding freshly picked herbs to a recipe or making sauce from sun-ripened tomatoes is a possibility even for apartment dwellers if they have a sunny porch deck or balcony where they can grow in containers. For those who don't have any outdoor space, they may want to consider seeking out a community garden. More cities than ever now have plots available for the general public.

What's your favorite Italian dish made with produce from your vegetable garden?

To me, a simple dish of Roma flat green beans and tender, boiled and cubed potatoes, tossed while warm in a little olive oil, fresh basil and garlic says summer in the garden.

Where can we catch you giving lessons and talks?

I've cut back on public events and classes this year to focus on garden documentations and two upcoming books, a children's book about a grandfather's love for his fig trees, as well as a coffee table book called, *Food, Family, and the Earth: Reflections on the Italian American Vegetable Garden*. I am continuing to do private classes and lectures for clubs and organizations, which can be scheduled by emailing me at info@theitalianguardproject.com.



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