



Italian Garden project celebrates the secrets of fresh-picked flavor and quality produce



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When it comes to the city's foodways, the Italian Garden Project falls among the most important groups, yet few people have heard of the grass-roots collective.

If its founder Mary Menniti has her way, more Pittsburghers will learn about the project through events such as "A Celebration of the Late Summer Italian Garden," Saturday at the Wigle Barrelhouse and Whiskey Garden in Spring Garden. Fig Fest will kick off the afternoon with activities from 3 to 6 p.m., a cocktail hour that will include a cooking demonstration in partnership with Vallozzi's Downtown. Snacks will highlight heirloom figs grown by the project's gardeners.

It will be followed by Terra Buona, a five-course Italian dinner showcasing produce from the gardens, such as heirloom tomatoes, sweet peppers and

celery that have intense flavors and picked-that-morning freshness.

The project

Italian Garden Project is a collection of gardeners from Calabria, Abruzzo, Sicily and around Italy, who left the region after World War II, when the Italian economy had been decimated. Having settled in Bethel Park, Carnegie, Sewickley, Shaler and neighborhoods in and around the city, these immigrants-turned-Pittsburghers maintain the old ways of gardening in their backyards — to great effect.

What makes the Italian-style gardens so powerful? Between the backgrounds of the gardeners, the rarity of their heirloom seeds, the design of the gardens and their methods for coaxing produce in a climate that's so different from most of Italy, the gardens and their keepers are rare, and their knowledge and practices are in danger of being lost.

These gardeners produce shockingly delicious fruits and vegetables. The carrots are so sweet, the celery is so green and the tomatoes embody the essence of summer.

If only we knew their secrets. Why don't many gardeners in the project water plants in dry spells? How do they hand-pollinate plants or graft an apple tree? Why is ash an effective pesticide? How do they know when fruits and vegetables are the perfect ripeness for picking?

Ms. Menniti has made it her life work to capture gardeners' knowledge and document their experiences. "It has almost become an obsession of mine," she said. "There is so much we can learn from these gardeners."

Ms. Menniti started the Italian Garden Project because she missed her grandfather's garden after he died. He had emigrated from the province of Caserta in 1912, bringing to Pittsburgh his passion for gardening and seeds to get started. She especially remembers his figs, and has worked to keep his fig trees alive.

She has now looped in more than 30 gardeners. And Ms. Menniti is looking beyond Pittsburgh to include those in Ohio, New York and

If you go

Fig Fest and Buona Terra

Where: Wigle Barrelhouse and Whiskey Garden in Spring Garden.

When: Fig Fest 3-6 p.m. Saturday; Buona Terra 7-9 p.m. Saturday.

Tickets, information: \$40 advance, \$45 at the door for Fig Fest; \$110 for Buona Terra. theitaliangardenproject.com or 412-244-2927

California. Several times a year in Pittsburgh and New York, she also holds classes on growing fig trees and offers heirloom seeds at events. And she is documenting gardens, week-by-week for submission to the Archives of American Gardens for the Smithsonian Institution.

Ms. Menniti is on the hunt for gardeners especially during this time of the year. “I look for statues of the Virgin Mary in yards,” she said. The statue is often a sign that there’s a lush garden or a few fig trees behind the house.

She also looks at people’s hands.

The rare breed

That’s how she found Domenico Carpico, whom she overheard talking about his garden in an Italian market. Once she saw his callused hands, she introduced herself and he, in turn, invited her to Jefferson Hills to meet his family.

Mr. Carpico, who moved to Pittsburgh from a village on the outskirts of Rome in 1956, will be among the gardeners who will be honored at Terra Buona, along with Antonio Machi of Shaler and Tommasina Floro of Sewickley.

Chestnut and MacIntosh apple trees mark Mr. Carpico’s front yard, while behind the house lies a handmade marvel: an Italian garden with elaborate stone walls he built by shaping and stacking rocks; no cement was used.

Potted plants align ledges, while an arbor thick with grapevines stands overhead. Mr. Carpico, who is 80-plus, started building this decades ago when his children were born.

Toward the edge of the yard, a zucchini plant tangles underfoot. Like a woman’s slim fingers, hot peppers jut from plants. Heirloom melons with dappled rinds hang from stalks that have grown around the chain link fence.

Tomatoes are the highlight of the August garden, plants that sag with deep red San Marzanos, a prized variety originally from Mount Vesuvius, with fewer seeds, sweet flesh and low acid.

Mr. Carpico doesn’t grow fig trees anymore, but Mr. Machi does. They’re smaller trees than the ones he used to have, trees that had grown too tall to

bury underground that he had lost to frost.

His wife, who died seven years ago, used to love white figs. “A couple on a slice of bread and she was in heaven,” he said.

Mr. Machi, 88, came to Pittsburgh when he was 27 in 1954. Though he had been a fisherman in Sicily, he became a produce man in Lawrenceville, running Machi’s Market from 1957 to 2002.

In his own garden, he used to grow hundreds of tomato plants. “One year, I gave 165 pounds of tomatoes to Mineo’s,” he said. It was a banner year, unlike this one, which, because of the early season rain, is one of the worst he has seen.

His garden is still formidable, but it’s a fraction of what it used to be, though the same sticks he tied together decades ago are still the frame for cucuzza, a type of Sicilian zucchini. He pronounces it “goo-GOOTZ,” which is also a term of endearment.

Once cucuzza blossoms, it takes two weeks to grow to its full length, which can be as long as a child’s leg.

One of Mr. Machi’s favorite dishes is pasta con tenerumi, made with greens from the cucuzza vine, onions, tomato and garlic served over broken spaghetti. He recalled how his mother made it, and how long it has been since he had the dish.

Food memories motivate him to work hard in the garden, even through his occasional bouts of illness.

Using the Italian slang for *ciuccio*, which translates to something between a hardheaded oaf and a donkey, he said, “I work like a chooch. But I am still strong.”

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