

Autumn glow

Merging formal structure with relaxed planting, designer Cristina Mazzucchelli's Piedmont garden reaches its mellow peak at this time of year

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IN BRIEF

Name Cascina Monferrato.

What Private country garden of designer Cristina Mazzucchelli.

Where Piedmont, Italy.

Size 3,000 square metres.

Soil Hard, heavy clay.

Climate Continental, with temperatures up to 40°C in summer, and below 0°C in winter.

Hardiness zone USDA 9.

Sunsets and even autumn itself seem to last longer at Cascina Monferrato in Piedmont, the country home of garden designer Cristina Mazzucchelli. Gravel and paved paths lead from the stone farmhouse through the garden to the swimming pool, discreetly tucked away in the lowest, most private corner of the property. Cristina kept many of the trees already on the site, such as the fig in the centre and the *Robinia pseudoacacia* on the right, but has added new trees, including the fruitless mulberry trees pruned into parasol shapes near the house and the golden-leaved *Gleditsia triacanthos* f. *inermis* 'Sunburst'.





There's an over-used, often joked-about expression some Italians use when they want to make polite conversation about the weather, but don't really have anything particularly original to say. You hear it most when the first frosts come abruptly, late in the year. "Autumn doesn't even exist anymore," they say.

It might surprise them to see the season is alive and well at the country retreat of garden designer Cristina Mazzucchelli, who is better known for creating small but chic, modern, balcony and roof gardens for her clients in nearby Milan. Ten years ago, she set about restoring a 19th-century stone farmhouse tucked into the rolling hills of Monferrato. The property, which enjoys sweeping views of the surrounding Piedmont countryside, had been abandoned for years before she asked architect Carlo Alberto Maria Caire to oversee renovations.

"We were originally confronted with a bare site of no-nonsense agricultural practicality," Cristina explains. "Outside, a wide concrete slab stretched the whole length of the house. It was used to park tractors and meant to keep dirt from getting in the farmhouse. Beyond that, there were only mostly dead or dying fruit trees and the rabbit cage. I saved the few trees I could."

The slab was broken up, and then work began on a new design by Cristina, which opened up views and championed drought-tolerant planting and a loose, prairie-style feel. "All gardens need human intervention," she says, "but here I have worked – no, collaborated – with plants that do well by themselves, without too much coaxing; plants that thrive in the climate, rainfall and seasons we have. Not having an irrigation system is part of my philosophy and has been for years – it's not just a trend for me."

Through her choice of plants and materials, the entire garden exudes a laid-back, relaxing atmosphere; it's Italian, rural and natural, yet elegant. A pair of carefully pruned *Morus alba* 'Fruitless' serve as living parasols to shade the outdoor dining area closest to the house. Cristina looks after them personally: "If you want certain trees pruned well," she says, "you have to do it yourself." Grasses soften the geometric, chess-board layout in the gravel garden in front of the house, with five rows of three square beds. They draw the eye across the space, and down towards the pergola beyond, which shelters a round, juniper-wood hot tub.

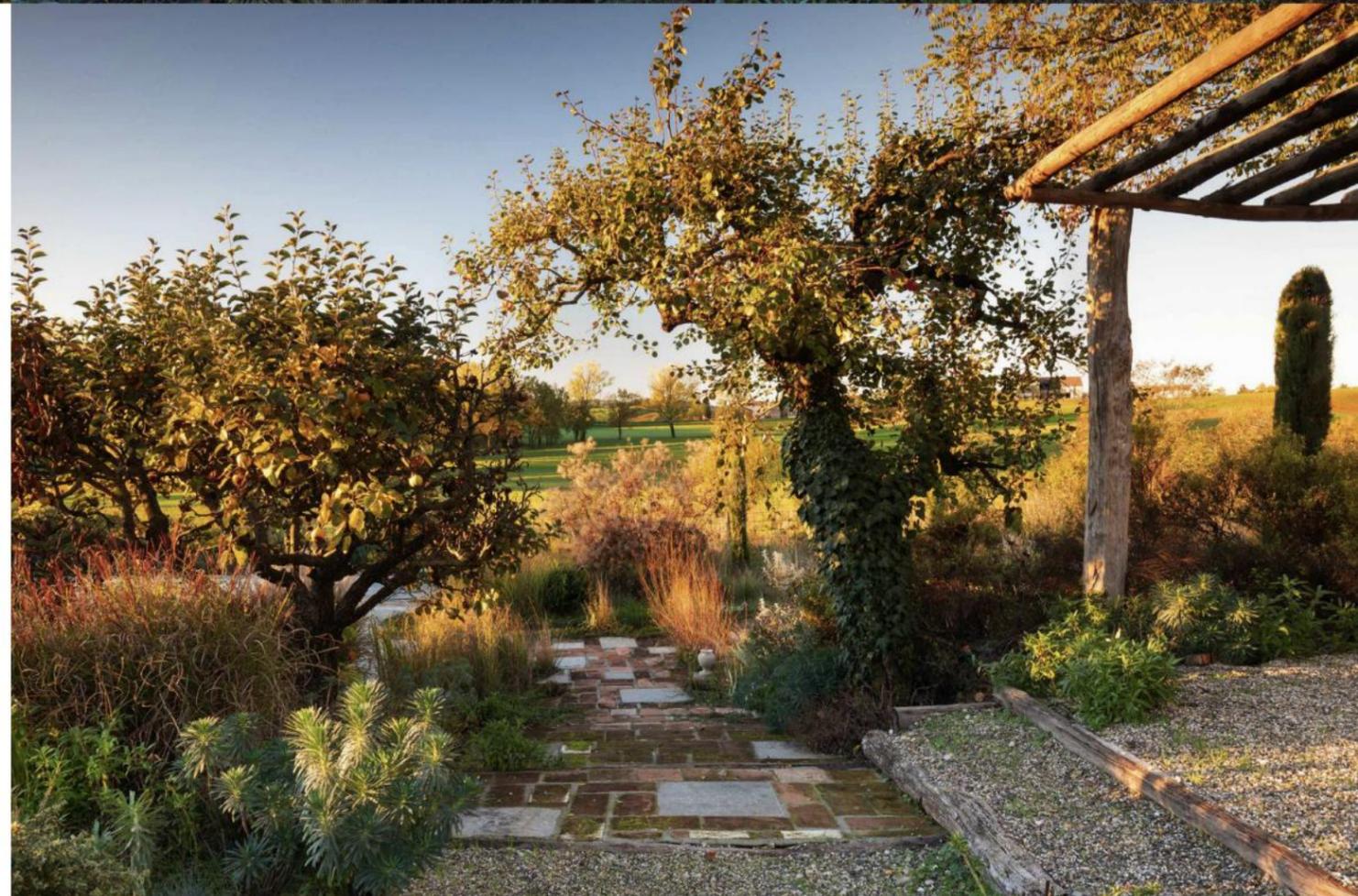
Terracotta and stone paths are the backbone of the garden's hard landscaping, and guide the way from here to the swimming pool at the end of the garden. Cypress trees from a show garden that ▷

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Above Neatly trimmed cypresses and umbrella-pruned mulberries combine with the geometric squares of soft perennial planting to give the gravel garden in front of the house an air of relaxed formality. A small rabbit house, which has been transformed into a tool shed, hides a pergola-covered informal dining area.

Right above Cristina has preserved the garden's agricultural genius loci by leaving whatever fruit trees she could save to stand where they have been for decades, and adding some carefully chosen antique items, such as a wooden wheelbarrow, a glass demijohn and a zinc washbasin.

Right At the back of the old rabbit house, a small pergola creates a secluded eating area with views out over the surrounding fields. From here, steps wind down to the swimming pool area flanked by ancient fruit trees and low-growing grasses and shrubs, including *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii*.



GARDEN INTERNATIONAL

Gently sloping steps lead down to the swimming pool area from the hot tub, sheltered by a small pergola covered in *Wisteria floribunda* 'Kokuryu' and *Clematis armandi*. Each step has a low wooden rise made of antique beams and a long terracotta run made of recycled pavements from the antique farmhouse and Piedmont stone called *pietra di Luserna*, which were patiently and creatively paved by Gabriele Giraldo.

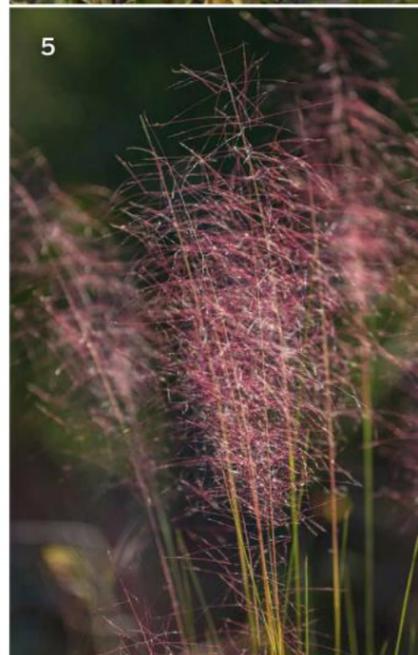




Cristina's 8 key plants

- 1 *Euonymus alatus* 'Compactus'** This compact winged spindle stands out with remarkable crimson autumn colouring. Height and spread: 1.5m x 1.5m. AGM*. RHS H6, USDA 4a-8b[†].
- 2 *Phyla nodiflora*** Cristina uses this common lippia as groundcover throughout the garden, helping to soften edges along paths and on the gravel terrace. It disappears over winter, returning in spring, and in late summer offers tiny white, mauve and orange flowers. 5cm x 20cm. RHS H4, USDA 8a-11.
- 3 *Pseudocarya sinensis*** Known as the Chinese quince, this small, semi-evergreen tree with flaking bark has dark-green leaves that turn vivid shades of orange and dark red in a cold autumn. Pink flowers are followed by yellow fruits. 6m x 6m. RHS H4, USDA 5a-8b.
- 4 *Albizia julibrissin*** The Persian silk tree offers fragrant, bottlebrush pink-white flowers, and fern-like leaves. 5m x 5m. RHS H4, USDA 6a-9b.
- 5 *Muhlenbergia capillaris*** Pink muhly grass produces airy clusters of pink spikelets, from midsummer to late autumn. Drought tolerant once established. 90cm x 90cm. RHS H4, USDA 5a-9b.
- 6 *Stachys byzantina*** Lamb's ears creates a silvery, soft groundcover and provides spikes of blue flowers in spring. 25cm x 1m. RHS H7, USDA 4a-9b.
- 7 *Stipa tenuissima*** A useful, compact grass with arching, feathery flowering panicles in summer. 50cm x 50cm. RHS H4, USDA 7a-10b.
- 8 *Salix x sepulcralis* 'Erythroflexuosa'** Known as the corkscrew or snake willow, this tree has wonderfully twisted orange-yellow stems that contrast with its green leaves. 10m x 4-5m. AGM. RHS H5, USDA 5a-8b.

[†]Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society.
[†]Hardiness ratings given where available.



Above A rounded *Cotinus coggygria* 'Royal Purple' shrub surrounded by soft grasses, including *Stipa tenuissima* and *Cortaderia selloana* 'White Feather', helps to enclose the swimming pool area. The strength of this garden's design lies in its restrained palette and conservative choices. Instead of experimenting with new cultivars, Cristina filled her borders with tested and trustworthy stalwarts, such as *Pseudodictamnus mediterraneus*, *Echinacea purpurea* and other perennials that can take the Italian heat and dry conditions.

▷ were once clipped into curly topiary have been left to grow out, and are now shaped more simply to punctuate the views and line the wide gravel path to the entrance.

Physical and visual transitions between the house and garden areas have a very gentle quality, including wide steps with low risers. Materials such as bricks and flooring tiles have been recycled from the house restoration; antique wooden beams and joists were used to make rustic structures for climbers, as well as steps and gates between outdoor spaces; and several items were bought secondhand or reclaimed. "Many of the furnishings, indoor and out, were chosen with my mother, Anna, who has an excellent eye, not only for the beauty of the objects, but for a good bargain," says Cristina.

In making her plant choices, she gave priority to ethereal, low-maintenance plants that don't require much water or attention, such as *Stipa tenuissima*, *Miscanthus sinensis*, *Muhlenbergia capillaris* and *Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Hameln', as well as perennials including *Salvia yangii*, *Euphorbia* Miner's Merlot (= 'Km-mm024') and *Echinacea purpurea*.

Autumn colours come to Cristina's garden in a multitude of textures and shades, from the red leaves of *Euonymus alatus* 'Compactus' and yellow fruits of *Pseudocarya sinensis* to the dark-orange hips of *Crataegus persimilis* 'Prunifolia Splendens', pink clouds of muhly grass and chartreuse cushions of *Spiraea thunbergii*. They contrast beautifully with the silver ears of *Stachys byzantina* and glaucous leaves of euphorbias.

The Dutch Wave of ornamental grasses and flowering perennials didn't really make it over the Alps to Italy, except for a splash here and there. Cristina, however, has known for years what many Italian garden designers have yet to discover and effectively incorporate into their landscapes. "I trust the elegance, variety and resilience of ornamental grasses and small-leaved perennials," she says. "Their ethereal quality will only come out if air and sunlight pass through them. This hilltop site allows them to be seen at their best, and the autumn garden glows beautifully for months on end."

Cristina's garden is proof that the Italian autumn, fortunately, does still exist, and, at least here in this hilly paradise of Piedmont, can last from September all through November; heavenly, golden and long. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Find out more about Cristina's work at cristinamazucchelli.com