



The striking bark of *Arbutus x andrachnoides* growing in the garden at Boccanegra, a property on the Mediterranean coast of northern Italy, owned by IDS member Guido Piacenza

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# Boccanegra

URSULA PIACENZA writes about the history of this ancient property and the plants that are grown in its interesting and inspiring garden.

Over the past five centuries there have been several owners of the site where the present villa and garden of Boccanegra now stand. The records begin in the sixteenth century with the Curti family. (There is a list of properties belonging to Tomaso Curti dated 1618 in which “a piece of land called Boccanegra” is mentioned). Next came Frati Minori Conventuali di San Francesco, (as mentioned in the land register of 1798) followed by the Rolando family from 1808 to 1831, and the Marchese De Mari of Genoa 1831 to 1865.

In 1865, the Biancheri brothers of Ventimiglia bought Boccanegra. When the family’s splendid properties were divided Boccanegra went to Giuseppe Biancheri, the renowned politician from Ventimiglia, who was a member of parliament for more than 50 years. He was a friend of the Hanburys and the German botanist Ludovic Winter of Erfurt, head gardener at Villa Hanbury from 1869 to 1875.

Biancheri was just 22 years old when he inherited and his favourite pastime was to spend his holidays at Boccanegra, where he loved to grow roses. This was mentioned by a journalist of a local newspaper called “Il Caffaro” who interviewed Biancheri in 1894 on one of his visits to Ventimiglia from Rome. There is a photograph of him at the turn of the century portrayed sitting near the house where the Banksian roses grew. They are still there today climbing over the wall that separates the garden from the modern Via Aurelia (built in 1812 and dividing the property). Before the discovery of this photograph it was assumed that Miss Willmott had planted the roses.

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The biggest changes happened during the first decades of the twentieth century. In 1906 Giuseppe Biancheri reluctantly sold the property to Ellen Willmott (1858-1934) who was the heiress of a wealthy English pharmacist called Frederick Willmott. Miss Willmott’s name will always be remembered among those who are associated with the great English gardens of that period, such as Gertrude Jekyll, William Robinson and E.A. Bowles. She fell deeply under the spell of this ancient coastline following frequent visits to the Hanburys of La Mortola in the early 1900s. She already owned two gardens, and employed up to 104 gardeners just at Warley Place in Essex; then there was Tresserve near Aix-les-Bains in France, and now Boccanegra where she normally stayed March/April and November/December. In this last property one of the first things she did was to build two large water tanks at either end of the garden; she also fought hard, but unsuccessfully, against the Italian Railway company who wanted to expropriate more land in order to double the railway line. She used the services of the Hickel Brothers’ nursery at Beaulieu-sur-Mer as landscape gardeners. They provided the “dactylifera” (probably

*Phoenix dactylifera*, the date palm) and strong fast growing eucalyptus to conceal the railway line. These Australian plants are well known to be fire resistant, which was useful protection against the coal-fired engines.

She planted quite a number of exotic plants that are still visible today. In 1923 she was badly in debt so she sold the property to another Englishman, John Tremayne. It is presumed that he developed a water feature, the "laghetto" (a small pond) and built the central part of the villa, thus joining the two existing buildings, around 1925.

There was an article about Boccanegra in the English magazine *Country Life* on 29 November 1929 with several photographs; one of these shows the south side of the villa where a young *Bougainvillea glabra* 'Sanderiana' is growing against the walls and only 2m high. It may have been planted in 1925. It is interesting to read that: "for thirteen years the garden was left derelict and neglected, until it was acquired by the present owner. What he found was a complete tangle of southern vegetation. The extraordinary thing is that so many of the original rare introductions have survived and are healthy, even after they have been swamped by strong growing local weeds for so many years."

When Guido arrived 60 years later he found a very similar situation. There was not a single document left by any of the previous owners just 50 leather plant labels with a number and an abbreviated genus (e.g., Pelarg 38). It was therefore important for him to try and find out for himself the character of the garden and to continue to plant and clear according to Miss Willmott's ideas. Definite characteristics did emerge in areas of the garden: the east side had become a wood of Mediterranean trees (*Pinus halepensis*, *Quercus ilex*, *Cupressus sempervirens*, *Fraxinus ornus*, *Phillyrea* sp.), a large area, a sort of rock garden planted with xerophile (drought resistant) plants, an olive grove with small olive trees, a wild area dating from the 1970s, another olive grove with larger specimens, a citrus orchard, an area of exotic trees among olives and finally an area along the path to the sea (made in the early 1960s). Initially the planting was not very successful due to the severe summer heat: several fires also damaged parts of the garden.

The initial work in the garden (1984) was to remove all the self seeded trees and shrubs such as *Quercus ilex*, *Pinus halepensis*, *Eucalyptus* spp., *Arbutus unedo*, *Acacia* spp., *Crataegus* spp., *Pittosporum tobira*, *Coronilla* spp., *Chamaerops humilis*, *Cotoneaster pannosus*, *Pistacia lentiscus*, *Rhamnus alaternus* and *Agave* spp. Some of the most troublesome climbers were *Senecio angulatus*, with their fleshy leaves and showy display of yellow flowers in the winter; also the more slender *Senecio deltoides*, both from South Africa; and the prickly Mediterranean *Smilax aspera*.

I met Guido some 25 years ago when as a young botanist I travelled from Livorno (Tuscany) to the foot of the Alps to visit his Mini-Arboretum, a nursery of plants at that time unavailable in Italy, in association with his friend and supplier Harold Hillier who helped him greatly during his stays at Jermyns



**Above left**, part of the villa with *Aloe striatula* var. *caesia* (known as the spickles) in the foreground.

**Left** A general view of the garden with photinias in flower and *Yucca filamentosa* in the foreground.

**Above** Looking east towards the Villa Hanbury and the garden of La Mortola.

where Guido was taken around and shown plants that could be successfully sold in Italy.

I had a degree in natural science from Pisa University with a special interest in research and experimentation with new plants. In 1986, I began to introduce plants to the garden that were native to dry areas of the world with a Mediterranean climate: i.e., dry summers and rains from autumn until late spring. These include parts of Chile, California, south west Australia and South Africa. From the last, *Dovyalis caffra* (*Aberia caffra*), *Aloe* spp., the already mentioned senecios and *Polygala myrtifolia* tend to naturalise easily. More recently we have decided to concentrate on plants, especially bulbs and shrubs, from dry areas of southern Africa (Namibia, Namaqualand and the area around Cape Town).

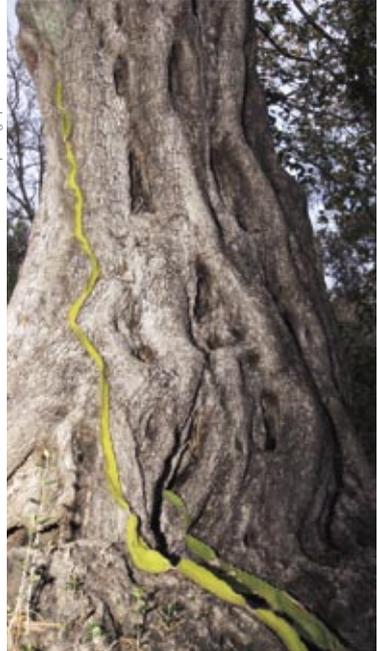
### Early planting

As no documentation has been left, it is not possible to determine what Ellen Willmott planted and what the Tremaynes planted. The oldest plantings go back 100 years. Outstanding specimens are:

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photograph © Guido Piacenza



Above top, *Agave ghiesbreghtii* with left, a cycad which may be *Encephalartos longifolius* and right, an olive tree that is several centuries old with a climbing *Hylocereus undatus* from Haiti.

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*Agathis robusta*, the Kauri pine, which is planted in full sun on a slope, in front of the house. It is about 15 meters high and 125cm in girth and has an exotic habit but is not very attractive, producing non-viable cones.

*Arbutus* × *andrachnoides* (*A. andrachne* × *A. unedo*) is quite an impressive small tree. It measures 160cm in girth but the overall spread is 14m and has remarkably beautiful cinnamon-red branches. The fruit is less abundant and smaller than that of our native *A. unedo*. Nearby grows *Encephalartos* sp. (maybe *Encephalartos longifolius*) in a half-shade position with some ten *Cycas revoluta* from southern Japan.

Trapped between olive-trees, balearic box and a *Brachychiton populneus* grows a 10m tall *Peumus boldus* with several trunks. It is a monotypic genus of economic importance in South America that belongs to the unusual Monimiaceae family from Chile. It is dioecious with leathery leaves and white flowers in terminal cymes in winter. The bark is used for tanning and dyeing. The leaves are used medicinally to help digestion and the fruit is sweet and edible. It is a nice-looking plant without apparent disease, and drought resistant.

About 10m further down, just before the agapanthus walk there is a large tree jasmine (*Jasminum heterophyllum*) from the Himalaya. It has big leaves and relatively small yellow flowers (something like this happens with *Rhododendron sinogrande!*). The wood is fairly brittle as an exceptional snowfall years ago damaged several branches.

There are several large specimens of *Rosa* 'La Follette' (syn. 'Sénateur La Follette'), a vigorous beauty cultivated in Cannes by Lord Brougham's gardener, Busley, from 1910. It has pale green leaves and masses of large orange pink flowers from late winter for several weeks. A few months ago a big mass of green and dead wood suddenly collapsed causing damage to an olive tree, *Photinia serratifolia* (*P. serrulata*) and *Sorbus domestica*. This outstanding hybrid tea Gigantea hybrid ought to be more cultivated on the Mediterranean coasts! It is a disease-free rose that tolerates dry soil conditions for months. On the south side of the *Agapanthus* walk stands a very large clump of *Myrtus communis* subsp. *tarentina* with several branches reaching 4m. I have heard that this myrtle is more hardy than the species. Some years ago I discovered in the garden a *M. communis* 'Flore Pleno', a form with double flowers.

*Pistacia lentiscus*, the lentisc or mastic tree, a native evergreen aromatic shrub has grown here into a small tree. It can be admired at the east end of the garden and reaches 7m in height. It is commonly grows here from sea level up to 300 or 400m and does not exceed a couple of meters. Although the flowers are not particularly attractive, the leaves and reddish berries are rather elegant.

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Pines are not represented in such a dry garden except *Pinus halepensis*, *P. pinea* (stone pine), *P. canariensis* and a tall *P. sabineana* (digger pine) from California, which has attractive grey-green leaves and large (and dangerous) ovoid dark brown female cones, each with a hooked spine and wingless seeds.

Other old plants include are a very large *Ailanthus altissima* (tree of heaven) measuring 21m and 200cm in girth, a few *Photinia* and *Rhus integrifolia* from California; *Eucalyptus globulus*, *Dovyalis caffra*, a large South African rhus with trifoliolate leaves, and another similar one, *R. lancea*; a few centuries-old olive trees, *Pittosporum heterophyllum*, *Acer oblongum* from China, *Paliurus spina-christi*, *Schotia latifolia*, an ornamental small flowering-tree with pink flowers in early summer which grows in open deciduous woodland and scrub in southern Africa; *Melaleuca incana*, *Lagunaria patersonii*, *Catha edulis* planted more than 70 years ago, *Aloe*, *Agave*, *Yucca*, *Nolina*, *Dasylyrion* and *Furcraea*, the "spikes" cover a vast area.

Other native plants are strawberry trees (*Arbutus unedo*), manna ash (*Fraxinus ornus*), St John's bread (*Ceratonia siliqua*), cypresses, almonds and bays.

## Recent planting

My husband Guido started planting more than 20 years ago. *Salvia*, *Brugmansia*, *Dais* and *Metrosideros* and similar genera that needed summer assistance did not succeed. However, *Melaleuca*, *Calliandra portoricensis*, *Heteromeles salicifolia*

(*Photinia arbutifolia*), which is grown for its bright red fruits and comes from California where it is used as small street-tree, *Eugenia*, *Acokanthera* and *Carissa* (both with jasmine-like fragrant flowers), *Cistus* and *Acacia* have been much more successful. In a sheltered position a frangipani (*Plumeria rubra*) has reached a considerable size (winter protection is necessary in case of the temperature drops too low but more importantly it needs the soil to be reasonably dry).

The garden of Boccanegra is normally very dry and is ideal for succulents and plants from almost desert-like origin. This is the reason why I concentrated on plants from areas of South Africa like Cape Province, Natal, Namibia and Namaqualand. All from seed – sown in April May and September/October, using different techniques for specific genera. After two years, with few exceptions, the young plants were ready to plant out in the garden. Everything is planted in autumn except exotic succulents (in summer) and tender exotics (in spring) like *Musa*, *Petrea volubilis*.

As far as planting is concerned, three groups of plants are in mind.

1. Those that require growing, generally in pots, like *Thunbergia erecta*, *Adenium*.
2. Those that need occasional summer assistance or winter protection like *Aloe*, native of summer rainfall areas.
3. Those that after two years of assistance are forgotten. Late spring is the right time to collect cuttings in the garden (*Phyllica ericoides*, *Convolvulus cneorum*, *Lithodora rosmarinifolia*, *Lavandula dentata*, *Mimulus aurantiacus*).

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### My new introductions

*Rhus* from South Africa. Shrubs or small trees planted in slopes and watered the first year only.

*R. krebsiana* from West South Africa with Mediterranean climate in poor stony soil, *R. rehmanniana*, *R. glauca*, *R. dentata*, *R. undulata*, *R. burchellii*, *R. gueinzii* and *R. pendulina*. As far as I know this collection is definitely a unique one on this coast. I like the dainty foliage that in some species turns red in late autumn.

*Harphephyllum caffrum* (wild plum) grows rapidly to 6/10m. In its native country it is used, on the east coast as a street tree; the old leaves become red.

*Combretum microphyllum* (flame climbing bushwillow) is a rather tender scrambling or small tree with showy crimson red flowers.

*Peltophorum africanum* (African wattle) may reach considerable size. It has grown rapidly and has showy bright yellow flowers and is frost hardy.

*Kigelia africana* (sausage tree) is a rather tender tree from the warmer north east of South Africa belonging to the Bignoniaceae family. It has now reached 4m.

*Bolusanthus speciosus* (Papilionoideae), the tree-wisteria grows very slowly. During an IDS tour in South Africa in 1988 my husband noticed these plants growing in a garden in the area of Pretoria, where the conditions are

quite different (acid soil (pH5) sandstone and summer rain).

*Dichrostachys cinerea* (Mimosoideae), sickle-bush, an acacia-like tree with bicoloured staminodes in pink and yellow spikes (this is one of my husband's favourites!)

*Schotia afra* (Caesalpinioideae), native to southeast South Africa has tamarind-like leaves.

*Psychotria capensis* (Rubiaceae), bird-berry is a small tree occurring from sea level to about 1500m with rich cream or yellow flowers.

*Tarchonanthus camphoratus* (Asteraceae), camphor-bush is a small tree widely distributed in South Africa. The bark has a strong smell of camphor.

*Erythrina humeana*, dwarf coral tree from dry scrub and rocky outcrops of the eastern coast with brilliant scarlet flowers. *Erythrina livingstoniana*—this is a tender plant from the northeast (not far from the Kruger Park). It has not yet produced flowers.

*Calodendrum capense* (Rutaceae), the cape chesnut may reach 20m in its native east South Africa; it has large striking flowers with white / pink petals.

*Diospyros ramulosa* is related to the persimmon but the leaves are smaller.

I made several trials with the genus *Cussonia* (cabbage trees). These are trees or shrubs belonging to the family Araliaceae with attractive large digitate leaves occurring on dry outcrops. *Cussonia natalensis*, *C. paniculata*, *C. sphaerocephala*, *C. spicata* have been difficult to establish at Boccanegra. Some collapsed due to phytophthora.

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*Dombeya rotundifolia* (Sterculiaceae), wild pear, is a pleasant bush with pear-like white flowers that has reached 3m.

*Spathodea campanulata* (Bignoniaceae) is a tropical tender tree with showy orange red flowers. It is now 170cm and flowered in 2007.

*Halleria lucida* (Scrophulariaceae), the tree fuchsia, from eastern South Africa, grows rapidly up to 12m with brick-red and orange tubular flowers. It has reached 2.5m and sets flowers.

*Heteropyxis canescens* is a small tree up to 8m with white or cream flowers.

*Pittosporum viridiflorum*, from east South Africa grows rapidly to 15m. It is quite similar to the Chinese *P. tobira*.

*Calia secundiflora* (*Sophora secundiflora*) from southern United States was planted by my husband. It flowers and sets seeds.

There are about 50 species of aloe in the garden, some need summer watering. Finally *Wollemia nobilis* from Kew by foot, by underground, by train to Gatwick, by air, by car, by boat then planted two years ago... slowly grows.

Furthermore there are new bulbs, succulents, herbaceous, small shrubs and climbers that make this garden a paradise on earth not forgetting my beloved sea. I swim every day of the year (in winter only during sunny days), this gives me full energy to work hard in the garden for many hours with great joy, without being isolated thanks to an important recent indispensable device. The mobile phone.