



PASSAGGI BOMPIANI



AGOSTINO  
MURATORI

COLLEZIONE  
DI SPINE

*Vita di un giardino*



AGOSTINO MURATORI  
A COLLECTION OF THORNS.  
THE LIFE OF A GARDEN

translated from the Italian  
by Alice Kilgariff

**SAMPLE COPY**

BOMPIANI



## THE BIRTH OF THE PRICKLY GARDEN

Imagine a garden with a rationalist layout: gravel, palms, pines, flower beds, shady paths, a few fruit trees, all geometrically standardised and compatible with old bourgeois habits. Then imagine it abandoned for ten years or so. My maternal grandfather, who owned the villa built in 1932, stopped coming with us to Anzio due to his advanced age, and Vittorio, the old gardener, stopped along with him. This meant that the resources needed for maintaining the garden had disappeared, and so nature (as it always does) slowly reclaimed its space. The flowerbeds quickly ran wild, there were brambles and dry brushwood all over the place, and the paths between the hedges quickly disappeared. As if that weren't enough, the garden had become a hunting ground for a group of young children – seven cousins, of which I was one – who had been given a free reign due to the general anarchy of the time. As a result of that collective euphoria, a football pitch sprung

up, to be used at any time of day, along with tents and forts built from broken shutters, and amputated branches that were used to make bows and arrows and lances. It is difficult to say whether more damage was done by the intensive use made of the garden by us children during that interregnum or the absence of any maintenance or care. A few years later, around the early seventies, I returned to that battlefield with my strange obsession: succulents. At the beginning I was underestimated, treated somewhat hostilely whilst working, and then ignored.

This new direction was marked by the arrival of a grey American agave. It was 1971. I placed it at the base of a large pine tree, one of three that gave the garden its vertical interest. My tendency towards miniaturisation, which would soon become a stylistic cipher found also in my paintings, was already emerging within this landscape. With no plan, no general design, I began placing the plants and rocks in small spaces, recreating different microhabitats laid out next to one another. From the outset, I gave precedence to non-autochthonous trees, favouring older plants that already bore the signs of time. All those things that give value to traditional gardens held no interest for me, even back then. I remember with great affection, and a little remorse, my mother's disconsolate expression when she saw those monstrous creatures multiply day after day,

as her hortensias, *impatiens* and geraniums progressively dwindled, the plants she called her *easy* angels, and which had resisted even the darkest times of abandonment.

An ambitious but unplanned garden that expanded haphazardly following the visionary whims of an inexperienced neophyte, was always going to have a bumpy ride. And I committed I don't know how many errors in placement and overcrowding. I wasn't able to take the plant's future growth into consideration, nor the central problem of orientation.

As I was dealing with exotic species, whose main enemies were cold and extreme water stagnation, I began to study particular drainage methods, asking for advice from experts in Italy and abroad. Then, when the first losses predictably arrived, I understood I had taken a dangerous and reckless path. Things began to improve in 1980 when I built a greenhouse. It was very much improvised and small in size, but it allowed me to do some damage limitation and attempt, successfully, some propagation. Four years later I designed a definitive structure with an aerator and even heating that could be used during those exceptionally cold snaps. It was then that the outline of this *exotic garden* became clearer. This was a first success, but also another incentive for my zeal

to find even rarer and stranger specimens, plants that were even more difficult to look after, and even more overlooked by my family members.

My real passion, even before plants, had always been miniature landscapes. As a child I collected tin soldiers and used them to enact battlefields, encampments, parades. With that same childish obstinacy, I began a botanical collection, with one area of the garden becoming Namibia and another, Mexico. These were followed by Arizona, Madagascar, the Andes, Kalahari, Yemen and so on. I would move the strongest plants out of the greenhouse, placing their bare roots into the rock garden with adequate drainage. The results, not always desirable, allowed me to help those plants generally considered incompatible with the Italian climate to adapt to the outside. There were years, however, in which I paid dearly for this. One such year was the freezing 1985, when a real war took place between the forces of nature, which wanted to bring order back to that chaotic fauna, and my unshakable desire to dare, continuing my experiments no matter how risky they may have seemed.

During a gardener's career – who could be viewed in a certain light as a potential assassin of living creatures –,

there is always the error of all errors, the most serious, the one you think back on with an ever-present sense of shame, as if it had happened only yesterday. In short, I once killed off a *Dracaena draco*. Convinced I could propagate it, take a root cutting, I had treated it like a yucca. But the dracaena is not a yucca. It is woody and doesn't put down roots around it. So, I was forced to watch the plant die, twice in fact: the original and then, shortly after, its offshoot. I didn't act alone. Accomplices are generally required for this kind of crime. I had involved my grandchildren, I remember them dragging pieces of dracaena around on a wheelbarrow with great concentration, they took it very seriously indeed. The death of such a beautiful plant, one that was perfectly healthy, was par for the course. But it takes time to understand and build a garden, and we learn from our mistakes. Over time you rebuild it, step by step - through all manner of extenuating circumstances - and eventually you manage to exonerate yourself. My young accomplices, however, never discovered the truth. Their enquiries about the transplanted plant's health met with vague responses. My wife, Rori, is the only one who noticed the disappearance from the outset, and not because she loves gardening and encourages me, quite the contrary. A first impression might suggest that Rori



does not like plants, or rather, that she is indifferent to them as they are too silent for her liking. She is someone with unbridled curiosity, curiosity is almost a vice of hers, and only human beings satisfy her thirst for news, for updates, for confessions. And yet, as I was saying, despite her indifference to the silence of plants, she notices if something is suddenly missing from the garden. One response might be that she has a developed sense of the aesthetic, growing fond of a landscape she finds reassuring. And this is all true. And yet, one observation she made in a throwaway fashion, almost by accident one summer evening as we were sitting on the terrace, convinced me that even Rori, the collector of human outbursts, had found a way to establish her own investigative and personal bond with the plants. Looking at the canopies of the pines at that height, almost identical in size, she said: “they are always in a bad mood around this time”. The pine trees, she went on, have their own personalities and are very diverse, but they are not generally easy, they are moody and fanatical. Their canopies are heads and they host intruders, like all heads do, assailed by certain, annoying thoughts. Rori and I met when we were thirteen and we are still together. There are many reasons why, not all of them clear, perhaps they are not even reasons, but anyone who attempts to extort

confessions from the canopy of a disgruntled pine tree, one in a bad mood, is the ideal companion for a gardener.

Going back to potentially irreparable actions, by a certain point, stable plants in the greenhouse had grown so much that they forced me to make a drastic choice: should I cut them back, purging some of the larger specimens, or set them free, without protection? After a long period of hesitation, I chose, at the beginning of the 1990s, to do away with the greenhouse. Over time, my habits were changing, I had added a more mature, patient side to the frenzy of the neophyte desperate to possess and plant everything he could. I slowed down, and finally began to respect the plants' living space, no longer seeing it as a barrier to be overcome. The garden is never finished, it always changes its attire, its dimensions, its allure. Around the age of fifty I began to understand this, allowing the plants to lead me and not the other way around. Slowly but surely, I replaced the highly exhausting yet creative annual movements with the less obvious pleasure of observation.

In the meantime, alongside my reproductions of great deserts I had scattered around a fair amount of prehistory. The cycads and *liliacaea* I used to pull

together the various areas of the garden exist today almost identical to how they were millions of years ago. It is strange to say it out loud but I realise I have designed my garden in part like an illustrated map, and in part like a Jurassic park. I found, or imported, all kinds of cycads: *revoluta*, *circinalis*, *Microcycas*, *Dioon spinulosum*, *Dioon edule*, *zamia*, *macrozamia*, *Encephalartos*. Every time I look at them, I cannot help but think how they inhabited the earth long before us, that they resemble one another despite being separated by distance, in Africa, Asia, Australia. These species are much more similar to conifers than to palms, which may seem, at first sight, to be their successors. The plant world, much like the linguistic one, is full of false friends, of things that appear similar, akin, and are not.

Among the *liliaceae* I have collected are *Dasyllirion acrotrichum*, *longifolia*, *triangularis*, *quadrangularis*, *nolina*, *gracilis*, *recurvatum*, *Yucca rostrata*, *Yucca brevifolia* (known also as the Joshua tree), *Yucca filifera*, and *Xanthorrhoea*. I have listed the scientific names of these specimens to do justice to the didactic signposts that emerge almost like minor plants next to the real ones, and speak the irksome yet charming language of botany.

## THE ORIENTAL GARDEN

Western tastes, always stimulated by the polite idyll of potted plants, preferably flowering ones, are light years away from the ideas dominating the oriental garden. In the contemporary western context, nature is a little like a childhood friend we lose contact with over the years. In an oriental setting it remains a constant, fundamental part of life. The relationship with nature is an extreme aesthetic discipline the objective of which is balance. It is perhaps for this reason that, after cacti, I was attracted to the Japanese garden and its natural miniaturisation: bonsai. Once again it was love at first sight.

A serene, timeless atmosphere hovered over the Japanese garden in San Francisco. The contorted and carefully contoured black pines stood out against the sky, alternating between the acers still wearing their autumnal livery. Nothing was left to chance. The paths snaked through knotty junipers and large azaleas; a lake,

with its classic red bridge, was fed by a small river that flowed from a crevice. The island at the centre of the lake was framed by water lilies in bloom. In the distance, superb cryptomeria and lines of Hinoki cypresses, like austere guards, formed a fence around the entire garden. Blooms of neutral colours punctuated the dark bushes, playing down the strength and grandiosity of centuries-old trunks. Tufts of bamboo sprouted up here and there like welcome intruders. Even the scent was exact and unique: humid, peaty, pervaded by a fragrant sweetness. The rocks, placed according to the classic iconography of traditional painting, represented the mountains of Japan, with Mt. Fuji standing steady in the background. I remember the muffled sounds of animals and the whispered conversations of the human beings, all in harmony with nature. Harmony, a word ever present in the daily Japanese lexicon, was the main ingredient of this landscape in which a contorted, falling branch seems to be reaching out to embrace you – and when a garden comes towards you, that means it has succeeded.

Usually that visit would make me want to recreate what I had seen. Speaking of which, in Japan, imitation is among the most highly regarded forms of knowledge. Despite having an impulsive and

impatient temperament, I have always placed great importance in models: by using the reproduction of an environment as my starting point, I have always been able to discover the essence of my own, which, for various and often obvious reasons, revealed itself to be different to the original. Indeed, it would come about from a specific suggestion, predominantly one that was entirely personal.

The plants I had admired in San Francisco, redesigned through pruning, would be able spread out in the (reduced) space I had left: the light would filter through their leaves, allowing other plants close by to survive. The stone structures, the characteristic lanterns blended with the pre-existing landscape giving it the air of an inhabitable, accessible garden, which the collector's dimension of the succulents, closer to that of a botanical garden, might have somewhat inhibited.

I began by designing the river and the small lake. I procured many calcareous rocks, including large ones, the placement of which requires a great deal of work, both physical and mental. This was followed by waterproofing and the construction of the little bridges – all scrupulously red – , which with the positioning of the central island, the installation of the lantern and

the collection tub, and the bedding out of plants along the border, concluded the first phase. I chose junipers pruned into cloud shapes, acers, Japanese oaks and *Podocarpus*. Lastly, I chose a small, tortuous bonsai fig, which reached an impressive size in open ground. Years of pruning, snipping at leaves and shoots, have shaped and maintained a formal continuity, even though the blossom rarely respects the shape imagined for it. In the tubs are carp, goldfish, water turtles that have grown disproportionately, frogs, tree frogs, insects and various birds have prospered, all regular guests along this path that, despite being the most engineered and therefore the most thought-out, has taken on a life of its own. All I could do among the succulents, however, was plant rubber snakes and plastic scorpions, scary attractions, jokes.

With the passing of time, everything in a garden becomes stratified, finds its own way, seeming almost to please itself. At that point the gardener starts to give up. I have to say that, in a certain way, I have also given up. I prune with more discretion and intervene less – not least because my back, of which I perhaps asked too much in the past, has finally started to rebel. I don't know whether visitors notice or not, but the signs of my partial retirement are evident. There are far fewer new

plants and far more sun loungers, not to mention some horrible seats placed in strategic positions. However, this is that great secret of the garden, of its beauty: it accompanies you, lives with you, and ends up looking like you. And even when it has destroyed you, reduced you to a twisted trunk, it always has something to give you in exchange.



# Agostino Muratori A Collection Of Thorns. The Life of a Garden

COLLEZIONE DI SPINE. VITA DI UN GIARDINO

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*A succulent, unusual and beloved garden, created in decades and told in its making and changes by the man who invented, watched and looked after it.*

Camera is a water tortoise, the bluntest among those living in Agostino Muratori's succulent garden in Anzio. She looks upon the plants as a brutal deity, as greedy and fighting as her manga-derived name. But this is a book about plants, not animals: palms, agaves, dracaenas, all tended to with passion, all desired, hoped for and greeted. It is the story of a garden and, of course, of men: Muratori, painter and bonsai artist, tells it through the people and plants who influenced it and helped him in his mission.

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**AGOSTINO MURATORI** was born in Rome in 1945. He has always painted and he exposed his figurative works in many important galleries. This is his first book, illustrated by himself.



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