

INTRO

It is an honour and a great responsibility to be here this evening to show you in a few minutes what the Hanbury Botanical Gardens are and what they represent in the scientific and horticultural worlds.

My intention is to underline the deep soul of the garden desired by its owner since its establishment and how it is perceived today by the University of Genoa management.

The site at Thomas Hanbury's arrival

When Thomas Hanbury first approached the Cape of La Mortola by sea, he was struck by the marvelous beauty of this spot. A house stood on a high commanding position with the remains of a medieval tower now incorporated in the palace. Above nestled a little village, and beyond rose the mountains. To the east of the main building were vineyards and olive terraces; to the west a ravine scantily clothed with Aleppo pines; while on the rocky point, washed by the sea-waves, grew the myrtle, to which the site probably owes its name.

The place was appreciated already by the Romans, Thomas found many Roman remains, kept today in the Archaeological Museum of Ventimiglia.

The garden establishment

It had been the dream of Thomas from his early youth to make a garden in a southern climate, and to share its pleasures and botanical interests with his brother.

The first plant collection introduced by the Hanbury's constituted of three dozen rose-plants of different varieties brought in 1867 from their father's garden at Clapham. But in the same year as well as roses they also bought new specimens of Passion flowers, Geraniums, Peonies, and Cedars of Lebanon. Several gardens and horticultural establishments on the French side of the Riviera gave them their early plantings as can be seen from the first lists of purchases made at that time. *Acacia*, *Callistemon*, *Melaleuca* and *Wigandia* collections were bought. Plants from Australia, South Africa and Americas were planted to constitute bio-geographical collection.

Succulents were of special interest to Thomas from the very beginning but the collection grew to its apogee under the period of Alwin Berger as curator.

After 150 years of many ups and downs, the garden is today rich in the number of important collections: Firstly, I will mention the collection of succulents which a recent scientific research has restored and reinforced.

Nevertheless, we cannot forget the high number of species belonging to the genera *Salvia*, *Passiflora*, *Acacia* (68) and *Rosa*, maintaining the old traditions and passions of Thomas.

Now I would like to introduce you the main elements of the garden's soul:

A Garden for the pleasure of the family

Initially, the garden had a double aim: first, for the pleasure of the family and friends coming to La Mortola.

Thomas Hanbury spent most of his adult life at La Mortola and was always happy when surrounded by his family and by friends, sharing his love of Nature.

Second, as a business man, he felt that the property should produce a sufficient amount of vegetables, wine, olive-oil and fruits to ship to London.

Today, the garden is certainly still a place for the pleasure of the thousands of visitors coming each year.

Some of our fruit production is donated to local charitable associations to help finance their activities, in harmony with the philanthropic care of Thomas.

Relationships with other Botanical Gardens

Since its origin, the garden had links with and connections to many other Botanical Gardens from all over the world. Since the early years there have been exchanges of plant lists available to all.

The list of seeds collected in the garden was initially begun in 1883 and it has been annually compiled and distributed until the present.

In addition the Curators compiled the "Catalogue of Plants" grown at La Mortola. They were distributed to all Botanical Gardens and they were also intended to help visiting students to understand what had been cultivated or tried out.

Today, thanks to the close relationships and collaboration with worldwide institutions we exchange scientific knowledge with 450 other botanic gardens. The Hanbury Botanical Gardens is a member of the BGCI, it takes part in the Italian Botanic Gardens network, and it is the master of the Ligurian network.

A centre of Botanical Research

Since its creation no efforts have been spared to develop La Mortola into an important subtropical botanical garden with scientific research and equipped with core facilities (Botanical Museum, Herbarium, etc.). When Thomas died in 1907 the garden was truly famous for its wealth of tropical and subtropical plants and their scientific importance

Plants that were previously unknown came to La Mortola to be classified and some were planted in the garden. For instance, this gave Alwin Berger the basis of material for his comprehensive study of the world of succulents.

Today, the garden is engaged in many different scientific activities. Among them we can mention:

- the set up of a seed bank to conserve rare and threatened species of Ligurian wild habitat.
- the melissopalynological analysis of honey produced by the bees from a small apiary hosted in the garden.
- the study of the Asian predatory wasp (*Vespa velutina*). It is an invasive alien wasp that poses a serious threat to European biodiversity, carried on by University of Turin

Forming new generations gardeners

At the beginning the brothers Hanbury were their own gardeners, but quite soon they wanted to employ local workers, being keen that they should learn gardening skills, which were still little known in the Riviera.

As the Riviera became more and more a health and pleasure resort, the Mortola gardens were opened to the public on special days. At first permission to enter was given by letter, but later it was decided to admit all who presented themselves at the gate, on payment of a small entrance fee. The money thus collected was given to local charities.

Today, the garden hosts hundreds of students belonging to different academic courses like Botany, Horticulture and Agronomy, disciplines linked to Environmental, Landscape and Architectural studies or local History.

Constant sensibility towards nature

On his arrival, Thomas was keen to increase the natural vegetation of the wild areas of his property, which had been almost denuded by locals cutting trees or grazing their goatherds.

Indigenous plants like *Rhamnus alaternus*, *Quercus ilex*, etc, now abundant, were then scarce or not existent. He sowed seeds in the valley and the rocks from these we still have the present abundant evergreen undergrowth. He also introduced various kinds of *Cistus*, which grew in the neighbourhood and other wild plants like *Euphorbia dendroides*, to sow in rocky corners.

Today, the surrounding landscape and the garden are a Regional Protected Area. The promontory and the sea around the garden are two terrestrial and marine Sites of Community Importance according to the European Habitat Directive.

The implementation of these objectives is entrusted to the University of Genoa with support from other local institutions.

Sustainable Horticulture

The garden has been widely known since its creation as a place where the spring flowers begin to bloom in January, but, by the end of May the soil is almost bare which is a strange sight to those who are accustomed to the green lawns of northern gardens.

But this is a Mediterranean garden in a micro climate and Thomas was aware that in a garden "soil, water, temperature and sunlight are all factors which determine the character of the vegetation, and Nature severely punishes any neglect of them". Hence his famous mantra: "Never go against Nature".

Today, we stick to this principle in the maintenance and management of the collections. The plants are cultivated following their natural reproductive cycle. In order to complete these reproductive cycles we have to leave the old foliage and flowers on the plants.

This acclimatization means that exotic plants can be introduced gradually and therefore adapt to living in our conditions and environment.

To strengthen this deep attention to a sustainable horticultural management, the Hanbury Botanical Gardens collaborate with many agriculture and horticulture institution in developing new "green" practices (mulching, recycling, techniques of biological control, etc.) and it has a photovoltaic installation, with the purpose to stimulate reflection and to find new ways to prevent waste of natural resources.

During his later years Sir Thomas often said that "to distribute seeds and plants, and to encourage others in their love of nature" was his mission in life.

The present Scientific Committee embrace his cause and it has recently formulated the new Mission sentence of the garden:

"To enhance, develop, and promote the cultural, historical, and botanical heritage of the gardens in the spirit of its founder"