

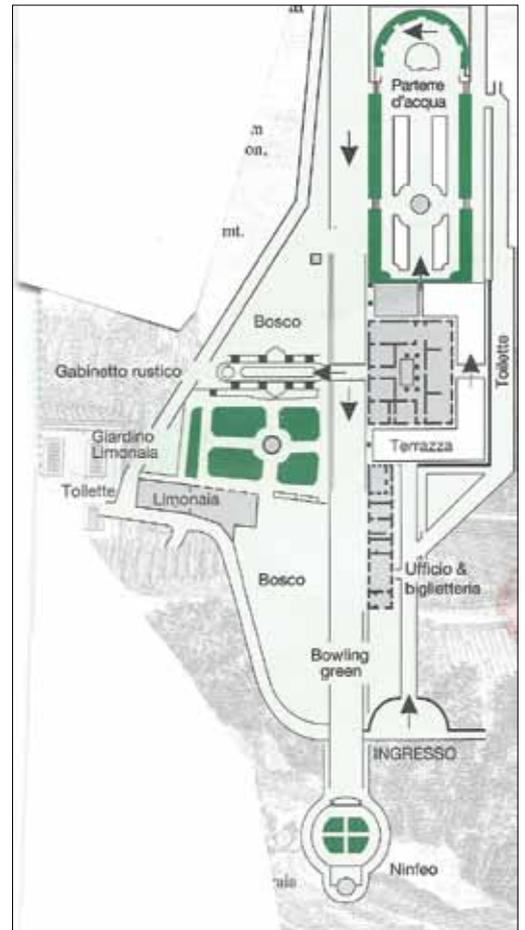
# VILLA GAMBERAIA, TUSCANY

STORY AND PICS: SANDHYA SUNIL MAILDM

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**Above:** The bowling green. **Right:** The Gamberaia plan. **Below left:** View of the Parterre. **Below:** The giant Phyllirea.



Villa Gamberaia was top of my list when researching Italian gardens to visit: sound advice from a friend that has visited most of them.

Built in the early 1600s and noted for its magnificent gardens, Villa Gamberaia is located in Settignano amongst the hills of Florence, about 25 minutes by bus from the city centre. Excitement builds on the walk from the bus stop to the villa. Views across the valley show endless slopes of Tuscan countryside covered with scores of olive trees. Rounding a bend, the first glimpse of the villa is a balustrade of hound statues carved of stone: they overlook the Arno valley where a young Michelangelo lived.

Architectural historians and garden designers throughout the centuries have studied and celebrated the unique garden plan, and setting of Villa Gamberaia in the Tuscan landscape. The villa construction began in 1610 and was completed in 1630 by the Florentine noble, Zanobi Lapi. In Tuscan style it combines interesting architectural features of both an urban palazzo and suburban villa: big enough to impress but the domestic scale also making it easy to be emulated. The ivory and ochre yellow of the villa contrast beautifully and complement the variety of green foliage shades. These range from the deep green of cypress through the

mid-greens of box, yew, ilex, and privet to the light green of lemon trees and grass.

The ground plane of the Gamberaia is linear with a predominantly north-south axis. This small space has all the elements of a typical old Italian garden – uncluttered and airy layout, freestanding house, plenty of water, sheltered and shady walks that lead to vantage viewpoints and skilful use of levels to provide different effects.

The original layout of the garden with the principal north-south axis unfolds in two parallel sequences: the path descending from the *paretaio* (a place for catching small birds) and continuing up the entrance drive to the main house, and the long garden avenue stretching from the *nymphaeum* to the *belvedere* overlooking the Arno valley. The shorter east-west axis runs through the *gabinetto rustico*, crosses the “street in the garden,” and continues, visually, through the vestibule, interior courtyard, and salon of the house to the terrace overlooking Florence.

The main components of the garden are the Cypress Allee, the *Nymphaeum*, the *Grotto garden*, *Boschi*, *Parterre* and the *Lemon Terrace*.



**Cypress Allee:** The garden entry is flanked by a buffeting avenue of cypress which is clipped tightly and ‘embraces’ you as you begin your walk into the garden. The cypress trees are sentinel-like, acting as guides through the entrance.

Along the lower terrace, to the right as you enter, are the Albertine roses planted by gardener Silvano Ghirelli in the 1920s.

**Nymphaeum:** One of the more extravagant gestures of the garden is a fully fledged bowling green. It is ensconced between the house and a huge stuccoed wall and is 300 metres long. At the northern end is the nymphaeum with the statue of Neptune at the centre.

**Grotto garden (Cabinet di roccaglia):** Leading off the bowling green is the grotto garden, its unexpectedness is surprising. Harold Acton described it as ‘one of the prettiest open-air boudoirs imaginable.’ Wisteria covers the boundary wall in the gabinetto rustico which is decorated with urns and busts of the seasons.

**Boschi:** Encircling the nymphaeum is the wooded arrangement of century-old ilex woods that intensifies the whole experience of the garden.

**Parterre:** Over the centuries different owners have made specific changes but in essence the garden has retained its original intent. The most notable change has been to the parterre where the Romanian princess Jeanne Ghyka transformed the space into a spectacular water garden (1896 onwards) and replaced old flower beds with four rectangular pools. These are edged by box and borders of iris, lilies, tea roses and oleanders. There are pelargonium and hydrangea in huge earthen pots. In 1924 Baroness Von Ketteler introduced the wide box borders and topiary forms that still give the parterre its distinctive architectonic effect.

**Lemon terrace:** This vast spectacular terrace laid out with huge earthen pots of citrus in a grid formation is breath-taking. At the end of this terrace is the limonaia, with its platforms and large windows, where the citrus plants are brought in during the winter months.

The villa was badly damaged by the retreating German troops during the 2nd World War. Marcello Marchi bought the property in 1954 and set about restoring the villa and the gardens. The evergreens were carefully reshaped into their geometric forms and the Phyllirea was sculpted into a huge sphere.

In baroque gardens, outdoor theatres were a common feature. This has been incorporated by encircling an oval conigliera (rabbit island) in a pool of water lilies and other aquatic plants with an arcaded ‘green theatre’ of cypresses with box bordering its inner layer.

It is now the property of Luigi Zalum and his sons, who have continued the work of restoration and conservation.

**References:**

Great Gardens of Italy – Monty Don  
 Italian Gardens of the Renaissance - Geoffrey Jellicoe  
 Italian Villas and their Gardens- Edith Wharton  
[www.gardens-of-tuscany.net](http://www.gardens-of-tuscany.net)



**Top:** Albertine Roses. **Middle:** Limonaia  
**Above:** Albertine d’aqua