

Pomona Botanical Conservatory's fight for survival

Paolo Belloni
Contrada Figazzano
Cisternino (BR), Italy
pomona@tin.it

Olga Spellman
Bioersivity International
o.spellman@cgiar.org



Located at the centre point between three Italian provinces (Bari, Brindisi and Taranto), in the Apulia region, in the heart of the Valle d'Itria, also known as Valle dei Trulli, lies the ten hectare botanical conservatory, the "Pomona" gardens. The conservatory is named after Pomona, the Latin goddess, protector of orchards and gardens, depicted in classical and neoclassical iconography holding an olive branch in one hand, a vine in the other and a cornucopia brimming with fruit resting at her feet.

The conservatory was established by Paolo Belloni, a photographer who, in 1993 abandoned his profession, travelling 20 000 kms across Italy contacting Institutes and agronomy faculties to ascertain the viability of establishing a national association/network to safeguard fruit tree diversity. In November 1993 he founded Pomona onlus – a national association for the valorization of biodiversity and in June 2004 established the Pomona gardens, which currently hold approximately 800 cultivars of fruit trees, following an organic farming method and traditional row planting system, using rain water for irrigation collected in cisterns located in every field.

The conservatory also prides itself in conserving genetic diversity of some extremely rare and antique varieties of sour cherry, fig and apple. The main collection



Far left: Paolo Belloni accompanies Vandana Shiva on a tour of the Pomona gardens in 2008. Above: the Pomona gardens on a misty morning and a selection of fig varieties grown at Pomona. Photo: Paolo Belloni, Cisternino (BR), Italy.

holds more than 220 accessions of *Ficus carica* and can probably be considered the most extensive collection in Italy, and among the largest of those in the Mediterranean basin. The rarest variety of fig in the collection is the *Ficus Luv*, an ancient main-crop-only variety of black fig from the Piacenza province in Italy, of which very few trees remain in the whole of Italy. Among others are the Fico Fetifero, a green- and black-skinned, bell-shaped fig with a smaller fig embryo encased among its inner flesh, Albo, Brogiotto, Gentile, Monaco, Paradiso, Pissalutto, Portoghese, Troiano, Regina Bianco, Regina Nero, Verdona and Dottato.

The botanical conservatory also holds traditional apple, pear collections, as well as apricot, sweet and sour cherry, plum, peach, ornamental and fruit pomegranates and minor fruits such as walnut and hazelnut, some tropical varieties (guava, feijoa, avocado, pecan nut and lichi), and a collection of citrus fruit trees that are unprotected in winter for frost resistance evaluation. There are also a few varieties of *Vitis vinifera*, for wine and some varieties of table grape traditionally grown in the area. The conservatory houses a vast variety of aromatic plants, including varieties of rosemary, sage, oregano, thyme, hyssop, mint, as well as horseradish, rhubarb, lemon grass, liquorish and camphor.

Among the rarer cherry varieties is *Prunus cerasus visciola* (known as "ciliegio progressiflora" in Italy), a sour cherry that has the unusual characteristic of flowering during full fruit maturation. First depicted/drawn in 1826 in Genoa, Italy, by Domenico Del Pino for the "Pomona Italiana" by Giorgio Gallesio, considered by many to be the most beautiful of Italian botany plates ever produced, the *P. cerasus visciola* is a late flowering plant, depending on altitude, flowering between April and August, but the last fruits can still be picked towards the end of September. It was believed to be extinct, until a specimen was found growing on the river Pesio (Cuneo, Italy) by Raffaele

Bassi in the early 1990s. The tree had been conserved by fishermen who used its fruits as fish bait for chub fishing.

Among the 30 or so varieties of pear and apple held by the conservatory is the Api étoilé (star lady) variety, ancient and curious in nature, said to have belonged to the ancient roman Appi family (hence the name Api), it is aesthetically beautiful, with its intense yellow skin and fire-red blush where the fruit is exposed to full sun. The fruit is star-shaped, due to its five prominent ribs and its rather oblate, flattened shape and is aromatic with sufficient acid and a sweet fruity taste. It was reintroduced into Italy, from the Gap Botanical conservatory collection, in France. The variety had been present in Italy until the end of the 1800s but had become extinct thereafter.

The Pomona conservatory is open to the public and hosts various activities aimed at promoting a love and understanding of plant biodiversity. All of the varieties growing at Pomona have been photographed and saved to CDrom and will be catalogued in collaboration with the University of Salento Botanical gardens. It is a humbly run family activity with no public funding, which is finding it hard to maintain the vast collection conserved. Local teachers, scientists and friends have also contributed to the development and study of the Pomona collection. A recent project proposal to the Apulia region to fund the maintenance of the collection through a refurbishment of the typical local "trulli" (traditional Apulian stone dwellings with a conical roof), which would attract tourism and thus promote sustainable development of this local jewel of biodiversity, was sadly not approved for funding. Two years ago, visiting Indian scientist and ecologist, Vandana Shiva, praised the conservatory for its recovery and conservation of rare and extensive plant diversity for local healthy and diverse nutrition. Such praise can only inspire the Belloni family to seek other avenues to ensure the long-term continuity of this haven of biodiversity.