

Villa Balzani - via Balzani 15 - Zola Predosa

The park of Villa Balzani, despite its proximity to an industrial settlement, is located in an area of outstanding historical-naturalistic quality, where the agricultural landscape is dotted with historic villa gardens and traversed by an ancient minor road network. The entrance opens onto Via Balzani, bordered by large oak trees, named after the properties that the noble Balzani family owned in the area. The Balzani, who came from England in the 13th century, perhaps as soldiers of fortune, subsequently inhabited the little tower (torresotto) in via Castiglione known as the Balzani Tower for two centuries. The villa, a sober three-storey building, is the result of the transformation of a farmhouse into a holiday residence, commissioned in 1860 by lawyer Andrea Balzani: the passing loggia, recurrent on each floor, looks out onto the large lawn facing the villa and is perpendicular to the fields. As early as the end of the 18th century, an oratory was annexed to the building, accessible also from the rear front (with terracotta decorations and the Balzani coat of arms: two crossed horse's legs surmounted by three lilies: 'balzani' are horses with one or more white frills above the hoof). The villa was for a long time inhabited only a few months a year, until 1989 when Mr and Mrs Balzani decided to recover the mansion, carefully restored by Andrea Balzani, an architect by profession, and the garden, created by Stefania Balzani herself, who set out to "restore" the old park, creating a country garden that was both refined and natural. In collaboration with her friend Cristina Serra Zanetti, a garden designer, Stefania, a naturalist, garden consultant, Lipu head for Milan and particularly sensitive to the protection of small wildlife, has been able to create a true corner of paradise, continuing to take care of it personally (without the use of chemicals), and boasting one of the wealthiest rose collections in the region. From the small gate on the street, past a low building covered with Canadian vines, we enter the bright lawn framed by large white firs and oaks, with the façade of the villa adorned with Bracteata roses, fragrant osmanthus and wisteria. Following a cluster of flowering plum trees, a group of trichome beeches (purple, red and pink foliage) and a camellia corner open up on the north side of the building. Two espaliers of shrubby pomegranate trees with intersecting foliage combine to form a striking gallery crowned at the end by an oak tree. We continue along an avenue of old and young cherry trees, sprinkled with vines and rose bushes. Towards the east, the view opens up over the countryside and hills, while towards the northern border, cypress poplars, hawthorn trees and holm oak groves (with some beehives) emerge. Over the last few decades, hundreds of plants have been added while many small, spaced-out forests have been created to provide shelter and food for the microfauna, also leaving room for birds, bats, hedgehogs and even fireflies, which put on a unique show in early June. To screen the shed area, cypress poplars, field maples, ash and wild cherry trees, apple trees and other berry plants have been planted to provide sustenance for the small fauna in the fields. We return towards the villa amidst small wooded formations, wild pear trees, junipers, a small cluster of locust trees for the bees, passing large bushes of botanical roses, whose branches fall softly on the branches of the oaks cherished by Stefania's husband, who passed away a few years ago, and who had gathered a collection thereof from all over the world. We eventually cross the orchard and a magnificent path under arches of roses alternating with vines of table grapes. A pergola with a table and numerous bird feeders hangs over the rear façade of the villa, while the southern side features a large pomegranate tree and a Chinese botanical rose, followed by a second row of camellias. Roses and pomegranates surround the low branches of a magnificent male yew, never before pruned. On the way out, the pedestrian entrance is guarded by a large horse chestnut tree and a rose collection underneath.