

Adventures in Water Features

Tuesday, August 24, 2010, 3:00 P.M. EDT

[Click here for slideshow](#) Some describe the famous Italian Renaissance gardens at Villa d'Este as a 16th Century water park; I describe it as breath-taking. My family and I just returned from our summer vacation to Italy. One of our first adventures was to take the local bus from Rome out to Tivoli to see the gardens at Villa d'Este. This villa and its world-acclaimed gardens, featuring 500 fountains, was built in 1550 by Cardinal Ippolito d'Este. The gardens are kept hydrated by all sorts of mainly pressure-fed water jets cascading into troughs, grottos, pools and fountains.

The setting of the villa, in the hills high above Rome, is pretty spectacular to start with. Water features figure prominently into the overall landscape design. These were not an afterthought or single central fountain. Every corner of these gardens has water in some form as its focal point. Great efforts were made to supply water to the site by diverting and harnessing water from the Aniene River and various underground springs and cisterns. Once the water supply was ensured, its flow was made possible by the natural gravity created by terracing the gardens into different levels. The mastery of water and the technology that got it flowing without the use of electricity is nothing short of genius.

One of my favorite features was the beautiful Le Cento Fontane (The Hundred Fountains) located along a tree-lined promenade in the middle of the three-terrace lower garden. The fountain itself has 100 moss-shrouded stone gargoyle-like figurines that spit water into a long rustic stone trough that runs the length of the avenue. My wife's favorite, the scala d'acqua (water staircase), was not a flashy piece but an unusual eye-catching idea with a curving marble stairway of water paralleling a dramatic center pedestrian staircase.

These early landscape architects made better use of water than we do now. When contemplating landscape design, we tend to limit ourselves to only one water feature. The Italians had the right idea 500 years ago. They didn't just tuck a pond in the corner, they used water everywhere. As we trend toward more outdoor living, we have areas of the landscape that serve different needs: sitting, cooking, sunning, dining, reading and meditating. Each of those areas can be enhanced with some sort of water feature whether it be a fish pond for quiet reflection, a bubbling boulder for sound or an ornamental basin for aesthetics. We often use the front yard to make a statement. Water is the perfect medium to do that. In today's competitive real estate market it is easy to stand out in a crowd if you use generous amounts of water in the landscape in different ways. Do not limit yourself to conventional thinking.

The one thing that hasn't changed over the centuries is that everyone wants a nice landscape. The difference now is that we underestimate the need for water. Villa d'Este is a masterpiece of design, beauty and ingenuity that reminds us what we love about water gardening.