

# The Cultivation and Ornamental Uses of Persimmon in Piedmontese Gardens

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## Abstract

In Italy, during the XIX century, the use of *Diospyros kaki* L. was mainly linked to its productivity. Indeed, in those years different cultivars were commonly sold on the Italian market. Few specimens could be found in botanical gardens (also in Turin) labelled as ‘botanical rarities’. In the XIX century these species were not considered as a garden plant instead of more appreciated classic ornamental conifers and broad-leaved plants. However, in Piedmont some isolated plants were present. In the XX century, with the decrease of the English landscape garden style, widespread in Europe during the previous century, some landscape designers, such as Russell Page, introduced orchards in the garden. Then, many landscape architects decided to introduce fruit trees as structural features of the gardens itself. The presence of persimmon in gardens was to link its productivity with the opportunity of using ornamental species that previously were not practically used. At present, in some Piedmontese gardens, rows of *Diospyros kaki* L. were used to create long alleys or as isolated plants as eye-catchers.

## INTRODUCTION

Since the VIII century in Asia, the persimmon was appreciated in China, Korea and Japan. For centuries different species were cultivated in these countries and now more than two thousand different cultivars exist (Ragazzini, 1983).

In Europe the more cultivated species are *Diospyros kaki* L., *D. lotus* and *D. virginiana* (Aloj et al., 1982). The persimmon was imported in the European countries of the Mediterranean Basin hundreds of years ago (Bellini and Giordani, 2003). In particular *D. lotus* was introduced from Asia in the 1550s and *D. virginiana* in the 1760s from Northern America (Maniero, 2000). *D. lotus*, also called ‘false lotus tree’ was cultivated in many historical gardens. The Grand Duke Cosimo I de Medici and his wife Eleonora of Toledo designed in 1550 the vast Boboli Gardens and planted exotic trees such as the Indian banyan and the ‘false lotus’. Cosimo I also had an orchard of dwarf fruit trees and in 1563 established a nursery for citrus fruits (Hobhouse, 1992). In Tuscany, in productive gardens also many of the local plants were cultivated such as olives, vines and cypresses.

During the XVIII century, mainly English and German plant hunters travelled through eastern countries and discovered many flowers, shrubs and exotic trees as *D. kaki*.

The persimmon was mostly appreciated for the quality of its hard wood, so called ebony, that represents one of the most valuable wood employed in cabinet works for ebon. The difficulty to value the fruit’s ripening was probably one of the reasons why *D. kaki* was not at first much considered in Europe. However for the growing, the sweet and the agreeable taste of its fruits soon became very interesting.

In Italy the persimmon was introduced in 1803 and cultivated and planted in

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gardens for its ornamental and peculiar features like the colour and the shape of the fruits. The famous botanist Angiolo Pucci wrote that in 1871 the first *D. kaki* was planted in Florence, in the Boboli Gardens and during the following years its orange fruits were shown for the first time during a conference in December of 1876 (Pucci, 1890).

Only at the end of the XIX century the propagation material of persimmon was introduced in Southern Europe. In this period in Italy the use of *Diospyros kaki* L. was mainly linked to its productivity, and nurserymen started growing persimmon in the early XX century (Bellini, 1982).

This study proposed to investigate the presence of persimmons in private gardens of Piedmont (Northern Italy) and their ornamental uses.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

While several public historical gardens, located in different districts of Piedmont were studied in the past, numerous private gardens are still unknown. A research was recently performed to understand the style of the gardens, the work of landscape architects, the history of the sites with particular emphasis on the botanical richness (Accati, 2007). A plant that represented a botanical resource as ornamental tree is *Diospyros kaki* because its uses changed. The study had as a purpose in fact, to investigate in Piedmontese gardens the presence of persimmon as ornamental plant.

The investigation analysed and selected 121 private gardens of Piedmont located in different districts (Fig. 1). The gardens are historical and contemporary parks and they were designed by Italian and abroad landscape architects or by the same house owners.

In this work a deep bibliographic research was conducted but few information was found in ancient documents and catalogues kept in public and private archives and a small number of old trees *Diospyros kaki* were found collected in historical Piedmontese gardens. The specimens of *Diospyros* spp. commercialized during the XIX and XX centuries were collected into botanical gardens (also in Turin) and were labelled as ‘botanical rarities’.

The goal of the study was to analyse the botanical species present in private gardens. For each garden was individuated the more important plants and their ornamental uses.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study showed that only in few Piedmontese gardens some isolated plants of *Diospyros kaki* were still present, while the other species are absent. In the past different situations characterized and modified the gardens in Tuscany where monumental trees of persimmon are actually present. In Piedmont, during the second half of the XIX century *D. kaki* was not considered as a garden plant instead of more appreciated classic ornamental conifers and broad-leaved plants. During the English landscape garden style in fact, the persimmon was considered only as a fruit plant and in particular for its productivity. Later, only in the second half of XX century in many Piedmontese gardens new species were planted. A very important English landscape designer, Russell Page, introduced the orchards in the garden for the first time. In his book ‘The Education of a Gardener’ he explained the importance of the double attitude of the plants. His new and surprising idea was to create a productive and ornamental garden in the same time (Page, 1962). After that many landscape architects decided to introduce fruit trees as structural features of the gardens itself. Recently, in many Piedmontese gardens *D. kaki* was considered as an important ornamental plant.

In the gardens studied only 17 showed plants of *D. kaki*. The persimmons have different interesting ornamental uses (Table 1).

In many of the gardens studied in Piedmont (6) ornamental persimmons were planted as individual and isolated specimens (single) in the centre of the garden as eye-catchers. In other parks (8) *Diospyros kaki* was introduced with other fruit trees to create an ornamental orchard as a structural feature of the gardens itself. In “Villa il Frescot” all the fruit trees including persimmon were delimited by hedges of *Buxus sempervirens*. In

“Masseria del Corno” close to Lake of Orta also harbours of *Vitis vinifera* were used to enclose an ornamental orchard. In “Vigna La Marchesa” different fruit trees as lemon, pear, apple, cherry and peach trees composed the productive garden with other beautiful flowers. In the greenhouse near the house vegetables are grown.

In other gardens persimmons are located in the yard to showcase their fall and beautiful foliage, to create property boundaries or long spectacular alleys (Fig. 2). For example, Russell Page in 1958 planted individual persimmon plants in “Villa d’Agliè”. Then, Paolo Pejrone a contemporary landscape architect, planted in the centre of the gardens of “Villa La Bossola” a single persimmon tree (Fig. 3). The English author designed the garden of “Villar Perosa” (1955) near Turin and delimited by persimmons, apple and pear trees all the alleys that connect the park. The artist Carlo Maria Maggia, that designed the garden “Castello di Maiolo”, used many persimmons in different ways. Single plants in fact near the house are planted as individuals, while others located on the terrace create a productive wood (Fig. 4), while others create ornamental productive orchards.

## CONCLUSIONS

Since ancient times, many exotic plants were collected and cultivated into private gardens of Piedmont and now represent an important botanic source of germplasm.

At present though, the interest for persimmon species that can be used for ornamental and landscape purposes is still not very common. In few private gardens of Piedmont persimmon plants are still present and they were introduced recently.

Some ornamental varieties of *Diospyros* have a potential role for their peculiar characteristics such as the thick and beautiful foliage, the sculptural and elegant *habitus*, and the ornamental fruits, that remain on the trees after leaf fall until January (Ragazzini, 1983). The importance of the presence of plants, previously not used in garden architecture such as the persimmon, was to link their productivity with the opportunity of their use in ornamental design. These characteristics give them high ornamental value, especially in temperate climate areas. The development of a successful *Diospyros* ornamental nursery industry and the exchange of genetic material found in historical gardens would be a contribution to the flow of genotypes showing peculiar and original features.

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## Tables

Table 1. List of piedmontese gardens where are still present *D. kaki* used with different attitude.

Name of the Garden	Projector	Location	Date of project	Ornamental use of <i>Diospyros kaki</i>
1. Castello di Maiolo	Carlo Maggia	Marentino (To)	1993	Single/Orchard/Wood
2. Castello di Rive Vercellesi	Home owner	Rive Vercellesi (Vc)	1980	Orchard
3. Castello di Solere	Home owner	Savigliano (Cn)	1976	Single
4. Giardino Bramafan	Paolo Pejrone	Revello (Cn)	1995	Wood
5. Giardino di Carla Bellora	Homeowner	Agrate Conturbia (No)	1988	Single
6. Giardino segreto alle Moline di Vico	Home owner	Mondovì (Cn)	1982	Orchard
7. Il Becchio	Anna Patrucco	Casale Monferrato (Al)	2006	Single
8. Il giardino riscoperto	Elena Balsari	Val Sesia (Vc)	1994	Orchard
9. Masseria del Corno	Elena Balsari	Lake of Orta (No)	1993	Orchard
10. Vigna La Marchesa	Home owner	Turin		Orchard
11. Villa I Frescot	Home owner	Turin	1970	Orchard
12. Villa d'Agliè	Russell Page	Turin	1958	Single
13. Villa La Bossola	Paolo Pejrone	Turin	1998	Single
14. Villa Oddone	Home owner	Baldissero Canavese (To)	1956	Orchard
15. Villa Ottolenghi	Pietro Porcinai	Acqui Terme (Al)	1955	Wood
16. Villa Viridissima Quies	Home owner	Turin	1988	Alley
17. Villar Perosa	Russell Page	Villar Perosa (To)	1955	Alley

**Figures**



Fig.1. Number of private gardens studied in Piedmont for each district.

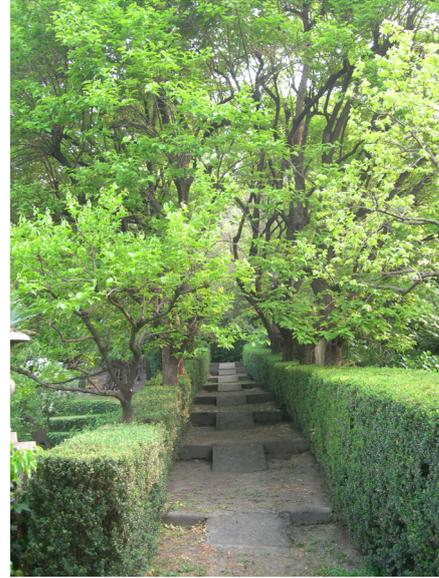


Fig. 2. Plants of persimmon along a shadowy alley in “Villa Viridissima Quies” (To).



Fig. 3. A sculptural persimmon planted in the centre of “Villa La Bossola” (To) garden.



Fig. 4. Persimmon’s plants creating a little productive wood on the terrace of “Castello di Maiolo” (To).

