

MAY 2015  
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Rome

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## CITY *in Bloom*

Experience the floral explosion  
of May in Rome

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# CITY in Bloom

It's hard to improve upon a city as visually stunning as Rome, but the floral explosion that takes place every May certainly does its best. Tiffany Parks stops to smell the roses.

## ● URBAN GARDEN

One of the most stunning spots in the entire city, the **Spanish Steps** (pictured on cover) draw thousands of tourists and Romans alike every day of the year. A meeting place for the city's young people as well as a backdrop worthy of a grand opera, the towering staircase and its sweeping curves are a monument to the late baroque splendor that Rome did so well. In fact, it's little wonder that the site has been featured in dozens of films, from *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* to *The Talented Mr. Ripley* to the ubiquitous *Roman Holiday*. No one can question the Spanish Steps' perennial appeal, but there's one time a year they outdo even themselves. From mid-April to mid-May, hundreds of bright pink azalea plants cascade down the steps, creating a luxuriant floral carpet that transforms the already gorgeous staircase into a dramatic culmination of art and nature. Visit at dawn to see the steps free of crowds.

Another of Rome's most spectacular spots is the Circus Maximus. When viewed from the lower slopes of the Aventine Hill (on Via del Circo Massimo) the sprawling expanse of the 250,000-seat ancient arena, with the ruined palaces of the Palatine towering above it, is a sight you won't soon forget.

An identical view is visible from the **Roseto Comunale** (pictured above), a communal rose garden, just a few steps up the hill. Every spring, this 100,000 square foot garden opens to the greedy eyes (and noses) of Rome's lucky residents and visitors. Plots of roses in every color imaginable are lovingly tended by Antonello Santelli and his fellow gardeners. The garden cultivates over 1100 species of roses, and the oldest bush is the 60-year-old Belle Portuguese with a stem as thick as a cherry tree trunk. Shaded by umbrella pine trees and with a view of the majestic Vittoriano from certain corners, the rose garden is one of Rome's most little known (and loveliest) sites. What's more, starting the 18<sup>th</sup> the Premio Roma competition gives visitors the chance to ogle new and even more spectacular varieties of roses.

Tucked away in a quiet corner of Trastevere, beneath the slopes of the Janiculum Hill and the Fontana dell'Acqua Paola, or Fontanone ("big fountain") as it is more commonly known, is Rome's very own **Botanical Garden**. While the garden's earliest origins date all the way back to Pope Nicholas III in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, what you see now was laid out in the mid-1800s and remains little changed even today. Covering 12 hectares, the gardens feature a bamboo forest, a Japanese garden, a valley of ferns, ponds teeming with aquatic plants,





a rose garden, an evergreen wood, hundreds of palm trees and umbrella pines, and at least as many species of flowers. You'll also find turn-of-the-century glass conservatories housing rare orchids and carnivorous plants, delicately carved fountains, and caves and nymphaeum begging for exploration.

## ● FROM ENGLAND TO JAPAN

In the 1960s, Italian noblewoman Marchesa Lavinia Taverna purchased an empty tract of land in Ardea, a then-rural area near the Lazio coast, a few dozen kilometers southwest of Rome. She commissioned British landscape architect Russell Page to turn it into a traditional English garden. The result is the **Giardini della Landriana**, a magical place that is open to visitors only a few days a month, but well worth the planning required. The gardens are divided into thirty "rooms" including a rose garden bordered by thyme, lavender, and clove, an orange garden, an olive garden, and a "blue lawn," where hydrangeas and other blue blooms cover virtually every visible space. It's the perfect place for a lovers' walk; romance is in the air as you wander through the grounds' carefully trimmed box hedges, winding paths, and delightful hidden ponds.



EUR is a neighborhood that is well off the typical tourist agenda. With its stark Fascist architecture, most of which was commissioned by Mussolini himself, it doesn't exactly conjure up most people's idea of the Eternal City. Some, however, adore the modern district's minimalist style and meticulously well-organized town planning. **Parco del Lago dell'EUR** (pictured above) features an artificial lake, one of the highlights of the area, where locals come for picnics or paddle-boating on sunny days. Spring sees the lake bursting with color as the cherry trees lining the banks, donated by the city of Tokyo in 1959, partake in their annual blossoming, or *sakura*, as this stunning phenomenon is known in the Land of the Rising Sun. Pack a basket for your own unforgettable Japanese-style picnic under the blossoms.

## ● FURTHER AFIELD

For exceptionally enthusiastic botanists, don't be limited by the confines of the city. Take off for an adventurous blossom-themed day trip and you won't regret it.

Described by *The New York Times* as the most beautiful garden in the world, **Ninfa** is a nothing short of an enchanted forest, straight out of the pages of a fairy book. The tiny medieval hamlet of Ninfa was abandoned in the late 1300s due to an outbreak of malaria. The village fell into disrepair, and wasn't salvaged until the 1920s when Gelasio Caetani turned it into a pleasure garden. The site is happily located in the path of several natural springs, and the result of this plentiful irrigation is a miniature eco-system where numerous varieties of flora are able to thrive. The crumbling medieval castle, the lazy stream with its curving stone bridge, and the myriad of flowers and plants that surround them transport visitors to a place where magic is very real.

Despite its out-of-the-way location, **Villa d'Este** is a magnet for Rome day-trippers, particularly the botany-inclined. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, the high-Renaissance villa was built for Cardinal d'Este in the 16<sup>th</sup>-century and was decorated by many of the master painters of the day. But visitors flock here more for the award-winning garden than for the frescoed walls. The hundreds of fountains (literally!) and eye-popping water works are impressive all year long, but in May the garden tops itself by bursting into life with the flowering of wisteria, roses, daffodils, azaleas, and dozens of other varieties. Wander through the nearly 500,000 square feet of manicured gardens, marvel at the many-tiered terraces and bubbling fountains, and peek into the Grotto of Diana, all the while remembering that this is how the "princes of the church" once lived.

## ● BUDS FOR SALE

If you're not content simply to admire May's floral ornaments around the city, but long to take some posies back with you to your hotel room, you won't have trouble finding some. Make a pit stop in Campo de' Fiori (pictured below), one of the city's most famous fruit and vegetable markets, where a large section is dedicated to local, seasonal flowers. Or keep your eyes peeled for the tiny three-wheeled trucks—a relative of the Vespa scooter known as the Ape—that roam the city, displaying and selling more plants and flowers than seems physically possible for their size. Serious flower-buyers should head straight to Rome's wholesale flower market (Via Trionfale, 45), open to the public on Tuesdays only, from 10am to 1pm. Be sure to bring your bargaining skills!





## WHEN ART BLOSSOMS

When it comes to the undeniable beauty of flowers, who does it better: the artists that capture it or nature herself? It's hard to imagine a mere human having the capacity to top nature, but many artists gave it their best shot. For centuries, painters have been inspired by these masterpieces of nature to create blossom-filled scenes and still lifes. Rome is full of these flowering works; here are a few of our favorites:



### Mario of the Flowers

Baroque painter Mario Nuzzi was so well known for recreating lush floral scenes that he eventually became known simply as Mario de' Fiori. He was so popular in his day that a street near the Spanish Steps was renamed in his honor. One of his most glorious works, *Mirror with Three Putti* (pictured left), can be admired at Galleria Colonna (along with the rest of that palace's stunning collection) on Saturday mornings ([www.galleriacolonna.it](http://www.galleriacolonna.it)).

### Loggia of Cupid and Psyche, Villa Farnesina

This delightful Renaissance villa is one of Rome's hidden gems, and more than worth a visit for its frescoes by Raphael, Sodoma, Sebastiano del Piombo, Giulio Romano, and many more. But it's the Loggia of Cupid and Psyche that takes visitors' breath away. Frescoed with scenes from the ancient fairy tale of the same name, the loggia's

## WHERE, WHEN, AND HOW

### - SPANISH STEPS AZALEAS

Piazza di Spagna.

Anytime. Free.

Best time: first half of May.

### - ROSETO COMUNALE

Via di Valle Murcia, 6.

Open daily, 8:30am-7:30pm (except 17 May). Free.

Best time: second half of May.

### - BOTANICAL GARDENS

Largo Cristina di Svezia, 24.

Open daily, 9am-6:30pm. €8 (€4 reduced).

Best time: all month.

### - GIARDINI DELLA LANDRIANA

Via Campo di Carne, 51. Tor San Lorenzo (Ardea).

Open weekends; entrance at 10am, 12noon, 3pm, or 5:30pm. €8 (€4 reduced).

Best time: all month. (Guided visits only.)

### - PARCO DEL LAGO DELL'EUR

Passeggiata del Giappone

Open daily, from sunrise to an hour after sunset. Free.

Best time: first week of May.

### - GIARDINI DI NINFA

Via Provinciale Ninfina, 68 (Cisterna di Latina).

Open 1, 2 May and every Sunday; 9am-12noon, 2:30-6pm. €12.

Best time: all month. (Guided visits only.)

### - VILLA D'ESTE

Piazza Trento, 5 (Tivoli).

Open Tue-Sun, 8:30am-5pm. €8, (€4 reduced.)

Best time: all month.



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vaulted ceiling is an explosion of color and fantasy. Framing each and every section are festoons of fruit, flowers, and vegetation created by Raphael's apprentice, Giovanni da Udine. The lush garlands feature over 200 different botanical species, including many North and South American varieties that had been only recently discovered at the time.

### Hall of Flowers and Fruit, Pinacoteca Vaticana

Visiting the Vatican Museums can be overwhelming—not just because of the immense number of works of art, but also thanks to the tens of thousands of people who traverse its galleries every day. Take a breather in the Pinacoteca, the Vatican's painting gallery that, due to its out-of-the-way location, is considerably less crowded than the other areas of the great museum. While you're there, look for the Hall of Flowers and Fruit and feed your pupils with some of art's most expertly painted blooms.

### Owl House, Villa Torlonia

Another one of Rome's best-kept secrets is the Casina delle Civette at the Museums of Villa Torlonia. While you won't find frescoes or oil paintings here, the floral representations might be even more remarkable—they're all captured in stained glass. The adorable Swiss chalet-inspired cottage is illuminated by hundreds of Art Nouveau stained glass windows, featuring birds, butterflies, animals, flowers, fruits, plants, and other natural wonders. Of particular note is the Balcony of the Roses (pictured above), featuring a row of windows, marvelously crafted with clusters of red, orange, and yellow roses by Paolo Paschetto.

### The Garden of Livia

Painting flowers is an occupation not reserved solely for the artists of the last few centuries. Ancient painters got in on the action as well, and nowhere is this more spectacularly the case than at Empress Livia's Villa at Prima Porta. The teeming garden is surprisingly lifelike considering the 2000-year-old frescoes are most likely a shadow of what they once were. All four walls of a large chamber were painted to mimic a real garden, with 23 varieties of trees, fruits, plants, and flowers, and 69 species of birds. Upon their rediscovery in 1863, the frescoes were restored and painstakingly removed in sections for transfer to the National Roman Museum at Palazzo Massimo where they can still be admired today.

### Chagall and Matisse

If you still haven't had your fill of flowers—real and represented—check out the Chagall exhibit at the Chiostro del Bramante, where dozens of his works display his ever-present flower motif. Or stop by the Scuderie del Quirinale's big spring show featuring masterpieces by Henri Matisse, many of which bring to life intensely colorful representations of nature's eye candy.



-- For visiting information, see listings on pp 52-56. --