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Underground Gardens

When life hands you lemons, grow underground lemon trees. That is how Baldassare Forestiere turned his misfortune into a masterpiece. In 1901, the 22-year-old Sicilian immigrated to America with dreams of becoming a successful citrus farmer. He landed in the Port of Boston—not the best climate for his dreams—but found work as a subway digger to earn money.

From there Forestiere moved to California. He first lived in Orange County—an ideal place to grow citrus, one would imagine—but found that the land was too expensive to buy (even back then). So, in 1905, he moved north to Fresno and used his life's savings to purchase 80 acres of land near the San Joaquin River. It sold for \$1 an acre, which was cheap (even back then).

With dreams of lemon trees dancing in his head, Forestiere began digging on his new property. He soon discovered—much to his dismay—that a few inches below the topsoil lay several feet of *hardpan*, the world's third-hardest sedimentary rock. He had essentially spent his fortune on 80 acres of concrete. Talk about a lemon! To support himself, Forestiere began working as a day laborer on other people's land.

To make matters worse, the summer temperatures in Fresno can soar above 115 degrees Fahrenheit (46.1 degrees Celsius). [Happily, it only reached 111 degrees last month when my husband and I visited family there.] But Forestiere remembered his father's wine cellar and how wonderfully cool the air is below the earth's surface. So he started digging.

Using just a pick ax, shovel, and bucket, the former subway digger tackled the hardpan. First, he carved out a cellar underground to use as a bedroom. Pleased with the results, he added other rooms below the hardpan. Then he discovered that he could open up "skylights" to let in light and air. He devised ways to collect and store rainwater. Eventually he realized that he could plant and water his trees underground and let them grow upwards toward the light. This opened up a world of possibilities.

With only an eighth-grade education, Forestiere read books and taught himself architecture, physics, engineering, art, and horticulture. He created a maze of underground rooms, gardens, and passageways. He built beautiful archways out of hardpan bricks. These he reinforced with the cast-off bedrails and other scrap metal he found lying in trash heaps around Fresno. Yay for recycling!



*Baldassare Forestiere (1879-1946):
Visionary and self-taught artist,
architect, engineer, horticulturalist,
and environmentalist.*



Left: An orange tree grows through a skylight. Center: One of many courtyards dug below the hardpan rock. Right: Forestiere's cozy, cool bedroom.

Forestiere was a deeply spiritual man. He created elements of threes and sevens in his architecture and gardens to represent the three persons of the Trinity and the seven days of Creation. He experimented with grafting to cultivate a single tree that bore seven different kinds of fruit: the navel orange, sour orange, Valencia orange, grapefruit, lemon, sweet lemon, and cedro (a giant variety of lemon called a "citron" in English). He also grew strawberries, dates, several varieties of grapes, as well as the lesser-known quince, kumquat, loquat, and jujube.

As his underground citrus trees matured, the fruits on the top branches could easily be plucked "upstairs" from the ground level. Soon Forestiere's younger brother Giuseppe traveled from Sicily to join him in Fresno. Giuseppe began selling the produce from the underground orchards. Eventually he brought in enough income so that Forestiere could quit his day job as a laborer and devote himself full-time to digging.

Forestiere never married or had children. By 1923, the local newspaper reported that he had excavated and planted 10 acres underground. His compound consisted of more than 50 subterranean rooms and passageways, which he loved to show to visitors. No one knows for sure how much more Forestiere added by the time of his death, but it's estimated that he excavated a total of 20 to 23 acres. He spent 40 years digging his dream.

Forestiere was a visionary genius. There is no evidence that he ever drew a blueprint for an underground room or mapped out an orchard. He just started digging and beautiful results emerged. I am reminded of Michelangelo's words, "I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free." Forestiere inspires me with his sheer creative energy and joy.

Forestiere dreamed of creating a resort where the residents of Fresno could find relief from the heat. He envisioned a restaurant in which each table had a citrus tree growing out the center so that guests could pluck fruit for an appetizer while they waited for their entrees. He designed an underground fish pond and stocked it with his catch from the San Joaquin River. He planned to expand this into a multi-level aquarium, which was to be the centerpiece of his resort.



In order for his guests to reach the resort, he excavated an auto tunnel. For this project he hitched his two mules, Dolly and Molly, to the latest technology—the Fresno scraper. By the time of his death, Forestiere had even started digging a ballroom, for heaven’s sake!

But all of this could have been lost had it not been for Giuseppe. Forestiere died in 1946 from complications from an emergency hernia operation—imagine that! He was 67 years old. He left no will, so his estate was to be divided equally among his five siblings, four of whom remained in Sicily. Giuseppe tried to persuade the others to move to Fresno, but they refused. The 80 acres was sold and the money divided.

Giuseppe took his inheritance and purchased back 10 acres, including his brother’s subterranean living quarters and the underground gardens. Giuseppe even finished the 3,500-square-foot ballroom, which his brother had begun digging 12 feet underground. Giuseppe deserves a lot of credit. He appreciated his brother’s life’s work and preserved his legacy.

When Giuseppe died, his 10 acres were divided between his two sons. The younger son sold off his half, but the elder son, Ricardo, kept his 5 acres. His inheritance included the heart of Forestiere’s underground gardens. Ricardo, along with his wife Lorraine and their six children, maintained the property, cultivated the gardens, and continued Forestiere’s tradition of giving tours to the public.

Ricardo and Lorraine were instrumental in pursuing the site’s historic status as a state landmark and getting it listed on the National Register of Historic Place in 1979. Today the property is still family owned and operated. The fourth, fifth, and sixth generations continue to care for the Forestiere Underground Gardens. I enjoyed visiting it with three generations of my husband’s family.



Let me close with this wonderful quotation from Baldassare Forestiere himself: “To make something with a lot of money, that is easy; but to make something out of nothing—that now is really something.”

I learned Forestiere’s story last month while visiting my husband’s family in Fresno. Here a bunch of us wait for the Underground Gardens tour to begin.

Have a delightful day! 

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