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POMPEIAN PLANTS FOR SALE

Herbalist's shop opens in archaeological site



POMPEII (ANSA) - Fruits, herbs, seeds and other plant products popular with ancient Romans will go back on sale this week in a renovated herbalist's store in the archaeological site of Pompeii.

The merchandise has all been produced from plants grown in a Pompeian botanical garden, painstakingly restored to its former glory.

An interdisciplinary team, including archaeologists, biologists, botanists and historians, has spent years excavating the remains of the site, identifying exactly which plants were grown where.

The 800-square-metre garden is now once again home to a vast variety of greenery, including fruit trees, medicinal herbs and vegetables.

The project also entailed extensive analysis of Roman texts in order to produce items as close as possible to what would once have been sold in the herbalist.

One of the most popular products grown in the ancient garden were different kinds of nuts, according to the biologist leading the team, Annamaria Ciarallo.

"The inhabitants of Pompeii obviously didn't have fridges to preserve food, so walnuts, almonds and hazelnuts were all very common," she explained.

The garden is also home to apple, quince, fig and olive trees, while there is a range of herbs, used both in food preparation and for medicinal purposes.

These include basil and marjoram, as well as thyme, which has antiseptic qualities, garlic, used for high blood pressure, and rue, which can help induce abortion.

Pompeii's marshy soil made it particularly well-suited to riverside trees, said Ciarallo. These include ash, whose flexible wood was used to make bed staves, willow, used for baskets, and poplar.

Different kinds of cane were also grown for a variety of purposes: to make wicker furniture, to strain ricotta, to act as frames for other plants, to make musical instruments and to make screens to divide rooms in houses, according to Ciarallo.

The herbalist's store and the garden, which is divided into different sections signposted in Italian and English, will remain open to the general public until the middle of April.

This is the second garden developed by Ciarallo's team in the remains of Pompeii, which was buried when Vesuvius erupted in August 79 AD.

Four years ago the team recreated a 4,000 square-meter garden attached to the city's Casa del Profumiere (Perfumers' House).

This led to the sale of the balms, essences and cosmetics in the adjoining

building.

Violet, rose, lily, basil, dill, rue, thyme, anise, oregano and lemon balm were just some of the plants cultivated in the garden, although the perfumer living there probably also made use of more exotic, imported ingredients.

Ciarallo's team also uncovered several olive trees in the garden, which were used to produce oil in which herbs, spices and flowers were left to steep.

The finished product was kept in containers made of non-absorbent materials such as bronze and glass to slow down the otherwise rapid deterioration process.

The interdisciplinary group has also been behind a highly successful attempt to produce the world's first recreation of ancient Roman wine.

The project, now in its seventh year, uses grapes from the restored vineyard at the House of the Fountain.

The ruby-red, full-bodied wine was named after one of the buried city's most famous attractions, Villa dei Misteri (Villa of Mysteries).

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