

# Giovanni Francesco Maratti (1704 – 1777)

**G**iovanni Francesco Maratti (birth name Gaetano) was born, probably in Rome or nearby Genzano, in or around 1704 – not 1723, as stated in most references. His parents sanctioned his leanings towards the cloister and in 1721, when seventeen years old, he entered the Benedictine abbey of Vallombrosa in the Appenine mountains southeast of Florence. After taking his vows the following year he completed his studies at the monastery of San Michele Arcangelo in Passignano. The study of herbal medicine and botany was an important tradition in the Order of Vallombrosa; the abbot Bruno Tozzi was a knowledgeable botanist and Maratti, already interested in the natural sciences, explored the countryside surrounding the monastery with Tozzi and the other monks, and studied the plants.

In November 1739 Maratti was appointed prior of the abbey of Galloro at Ariccia. From there he made expeditions to the Alban hills with a local doctor and became an expert on the plants of the area. His enhanced reputation led to a calling in 1747 from Pope Benedict XIV, to take up the position of professor of botany and medicine and director of the botanical garden at the University of La Sapienza ('knowledge') in Rome.

When Maratti took office the half-acre herb garden on Janiculum hill was in a state of neglect after its initial period of splendour from 1678–1708 under Giovanni Trionfetti. Over the next 30 years Maratti enriched the garden with new species he discovered during his explorations around Rome or bought and exchanged with distinguished colleagues from other cities, and the reputation of the garden spread beyond the Roman Empire. The Swedish apothecary Johan Eberhard Ferber visited him in 1772 and praised the richness of the species, and the French botanist Philibert Commerson considered donating his valuable collection of plants to the Roman garden.

Giovanni Francesco Maratti died in Rome at the end of January 1777 and was buried in the monastery of Santa Prassede where he lived during his years in Rome. His work on the plants around Rome and the Lazio hinterland, the result of decades of excursions and studies, was published posthumously in 1822.

In 1788 Swedish botanist and taxonomist Olof Peter Swartz (1760–1818) commemorated him in a genus of large tropical and subtropical ferns. The sole New Zealand representative in the genus, *Marattia salicina*, first described by English fern specialist James Edward Smith, was transferred to a new genus (*Ptisana*) in 2008 by American botanist Andrew G Murdock.



## ***Ptisana salicina***

*Ptisana* comprises some 20 species of large ferns previously included in *Marattia*. The name (Latin *ptisana* 'barley grains') comes from the superficial resemblance of the fused sporangia to pearl barley. *Ptisana salicina* ('willow-like') is indigenous to New Zealand, Norfolk Island (the type locality), the South Pacific and possibly elsewhere. Commonly known in New Zealand as king fern, para or horseshoe fern, it favours lowland forest, karst habitats and damp streamsides, and is found in the western North Island, north of inland Wanganui. It is a large, robust fern with fronds up to 5 metres tall arising from a stout, starchy base that was a traditional food for Māori. Plant collecting, and animal browsing have led to its serious decline.