

Michelangelo Tilli (1655 – 1740)

Michelangelo (or Michaele Angelo) Tilli, the son of Desiderio Tilli and Lucrezia Salvadori, was born on 14 April 1655 in Castelfiorentino, a town between Florence and Pisa in the Tuscany region of Italy. After studying at the University of Pisa and graduating in medicine and surgery in 1677, he settled in Florence where he became acquainted with the celebrated physician, naturalist and poet Francis Redi. In 1681 on Redi's recommendation, the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Cosimo III de' Medici, appointed him physician to the ducal fleet of galleys bound for the Balearic Islands, south of Spain. It was a position well suited to Tilli's interest in the culture and natural curiosities of other lands.



Crassula moschata

Crassula (Latin *crassus* 'thick', referring to the thick succulent leaves) is a genus of about 1,480 species native to many parts of the world. *Crassula moschata* ('musky' – the slight scent noted by George Forster in his 1787 description of the species) is a loose or dense mat-forming succulent perennial herb, rooting at the nodes and ascending at the tips. The solitary star-like flowers, which may be red, pink or white, appear in the axils of the upper leaves throughout the year. Strictly coastal, it occurs in the littoral zone on wave-washed rock platforms and cliff faces (where the plants are usually reddish in colour), and in damp, peaty seepages and tidal creeks (where they tend to be bright green). It has a circumpolar range in subantarctic latitudes, and is common in southern New Zealand and found sporadically north to Island Bay, Wellington. The species was illustrated as *Tillaea moschata* by Matilda Smith in Cheeseman's *Illustrations of the New Zealand Flora* (1914).

In 1683, with the Florentine surgeon Pier Francesco Pasquali, he went to Istanbul to attend the Sultan's son-in-law who had been seriously injured in a fall from his horse. From there they spent time in Turkey and Albania where other Ottoman nobles were treated. Later, Tilli was consulted for medical advice on the health of the bey (governor) of Tunisia, and was granted permission to study the remains of ancient Carthage and to collect botanical specimens.

He was still collecting in 1684 when Cosimo III appointed him professor of botany at the University of Pisa and director of the botanic garden (*Giardino dei Semplici* – Garden of Simples). Subsequently he devoted his time to improvement of the garden, the duties of his profession and the guidance of his students. He became a member of the Royal Society of London in 1708. Among the first in Italy to use greenhouses (or heated rooms) for plants, he introduced species from Asia and Africa and was able to cultivate such exotics as pineapples and coffee in Italy. His well-known detailed copperplate engraving of the layout of the garden, which followed the fashion of the so-called Italian Renaissance garden, was published in his *Catalogus Plantarum Horti Pisone* in 1723. It depicts eight large slightly rhomboid beds, each regularly divided into small areas of various symmetric shapes. The fountain in the centre of each bed (a few of them still in existence) would have facilitated watering and added to the aesthetics of the garden.

It has been suggested that Cosimo III's health problems may have been a catalyst for his enthusiastic interest in botany and support for the garden. He was aware of the value of fruit for a long and healthy life, and promoted the importation of plants (at great expense) from as far away as the Americas. They were then grown and propagated in the stately gardens of Tuscany. In Tilli's *Catalogus* more than four thousand plants cultivated in the Pisa garden are listed, fifty of them illustrated by the renowned artist Cosimo Mogalli.

Michaelangelo Tilli died in Pisa on 13 March 1740, in his 85th year, seemingly unmarried and childless. His compatriot Pier Antonio Micheli, in his *Nova Plantarum Genera* (1729), named the genus *Tillaea* in the family Crassulaceae in his honour, and it was formalised by Carl Linnaeus in 1753. Today it is incorporated in the genus *Crassula*.