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Through our French window

Gordon James

Fig. 1 *Asphodelus ramosus*

In 2014 I wrote an article for this journal about the orchids that grow on and around a limestone plateau in Southern France called the Plateau du Guilhaumard, which is situated on the southern edge of the great Causse du Larzac, a limestone karst plateau in the south of the Massif Central. Guilhaumard rises steeply above the hamlet of Le Clapier where we have a small house, and covers an area of perhaps 25km^2 lying 750–850m above sea level which, together with the surrounding countryside, supports an extraordinarily rich range of plants besides orchids.

I wasn't sure how best to introduce the plants I think deserve special attention – systematically perhaps, dealing with the Ranunculaceae family first, but that could prove a little dull; or perhaps according to season. In the end I decided simply to pick out some of our favourites. With a few exceptions all the plants mentioned in this article can be reached on foot from our house by moderately fit pensioners like us!

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Fig. 2 *Asphodelus ramosus*

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Fig. 3 *Narcissus assoanus*

Fig. 4 *Narcissus poeticus*

Fig. 5 *Iris lutescens*

Fig. 6 *Iris lutescens*

Fig. 7 *Crocus nudiflorus*

Despite its elevation, summers are hot, as the Plateau is relatively far toward the South of France, though it can be quite cold and snowy during the depths of winter. Comparing the flora on Guilhaumard with equivalent limestone uplands in Britain, such as the Burren in Western Ireland or the limestone pavements around Malham in North Yorkshire, there are very few plants in common; there may be more in some southern UK chalk communities.

All the plants mentioned below are native to the region. Though most of them will be familiar to British gardeners, and many are widely grown in our gardens, only 36% of them are recorded as also native to Britain, and many of these are very rare or local. Given the cold winters here in France they should all be perfectly hardy.

I will start with those plants which, at least for a moment, carpet the ground and foremost amongst these is *Asphodelus ramosus* (syn. *A. cerasiferus)* (figs 1 & 2). There are problems with the naming of this asphodel as the French floras provide a whole host of synonyms, but once these have been seen flowering in their tens of thousands across the open limestone grassland or in light woodland, they cannot be mistaken. They flower from late April throughout May; the flowers are preceded by clumps of bright green foliage and followed by clusters of large, spherical pale brown fruits.

While the asphodel is doing its stuff, several other carpeters come into their own including two species of *Narcissus: N. assoanus* (fig. 3) which in mid-April covers certain hillsides in a carpet of yellow, followed in mid-May on different hillsides by Pheasant's eye Daffodil,

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Fig. 8 *Fritillaria pyrenaica*

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Fig. 9 *Amelanchier ovalis*

N. poeticus (fig. 4), with its delicate white flowers and orange centres. The odd plant of the wild daffodil, *N. pseudonarcissus*, also appears from time to time. In the same areas, you can find numerous flowers of the Crimean iris, *I. lutescens* (figs 5 & 6), both blue and yellow forms, together with the white umbels of the star of Bethlehem, *Ornithogalum umbellatum*. In early October two other bulbous species begin to flower: *Colchicum autumnale* and the autumn crocus, *Crocus nudiflorus* (fig. 7), both displaying their leafless flowers across many of the local meadows. The colchicum favours slightly damper places, while the crocus prefers more acid substrata. In some meadows around our village the two occur together, the crocus distinguished from the colchicum by its feathered stigmas.

Among the open limestone grasslands on the plateau grow both local species of pasqueflower: *Pulsatilla vulgaris*, which tends to flower earlier, often in late March and early April; and the darker-flowering *P. rubra*, which peaks towards the middle to end of April. They both carry very attractive seedheads for some time after flowering.

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Fig. 10 *Linum campanulatum*

Fig. 11 *Linum tenuifolium*

Fig. 12 *Helianthemum apenninum*

Fig. 13 *Aster alpinus*

Another bulbous species which flowers profusely around the same time is *Fritillaria pyrenaica* (fig. 8), which just about reaches the northern and eastern edges of its French range here. It differs from our own snake's head fritillary (*F. meleagris*), in having a shorter and narrower bell-shaped flower.

Our small hamlet of Le Clapier is in the commune of Cornus, an apt coincidence since the common dogwood, *Cornus sanguinea*, is a very common shrub right across the region. The Plateau du Guilhaumard was once covered in dense beech forest until mining activities further down the valley in the 18th and 19th centuries led to its severe deforestation. Now the trees and associated shrubs are returning: in May the cornus bushes are covered in round heads of creamy flowers and in the autumn they glow with red foliage. There are dozens of other species of small trees and shrubs, including *Amelanchier ovalis* (fig. 9), bearing oval leaves a little like those of a pear tree, felted on the underside with white hairs. In late April and throughout May they are covered in white blossom.

Where the massive magnesium limestones which make up the backbone of the plateau have eroded to form a coarse grey sand,

Fig. 14 *Daphne cneorum*

Fig. 15 *Dianthus superbus*

Fig. 16 *Saponaria ocymoides*

Fig. 17 *Campanula speciosa*

many smaller plants thrive in the dry open habitats. Among these are several species of *Linum* in blues, yellows and whites. The blue *Linum bienne* can be found in profusion, while less commonly found are the yellow *L. campanulatum* (fig. 10) and the white *L. tenuifolium* (fig. 11) with its tiny, prostrate woody stems. Other plants which enjoy these open habitats include *Iberis saxatilis* and a range of ground-hugging helianthemums, including the white *H. apenninum* (fig. 12), shown in the photograph growing among the Iberis. Clumps of *Aster alpinus* (fig. 13) with its blue-purple flowers can be found here throughout May and into June.

Also enjoying these sites is the lovely small shrub *Daphne cneorum* (fig. 14) which is covered in bright-pink flowers during the middle weeks of April, before being joined by *D. laureola* in mid-May and *D. alpina* in June. In similar habitats but a little later in the year are several *Dianthus* species growing either individually or in small groups. The most interesting of these goes under the appropriate name of *Dianthus superbus* (fig. 15); this small plant delights with its five deeply cut pale-pink petals. Closely related to the dianthus, the rock-hugging soapwort, *Saponaria ocymoides* (fig. 16) with its bright-pink flowers, can be seen almost anywhere around the village and surrounding countryside from late April through May.

July is the month for the campanulas, which include C. *glomerata*, C. *persicifolia*, C. *rapunculoides*, C. *rotundifolia*, C. *trachelium* and the king of them all, C. *speciosa* (fig. 17). Admittedly this last species isn't to be found on the plateau, and one must travel 20km to a particular cirque or rocky

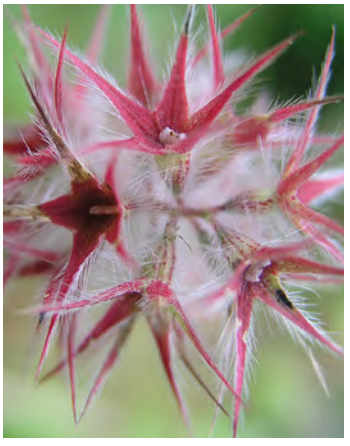

Fig. 18 *Trifolium stellatum*

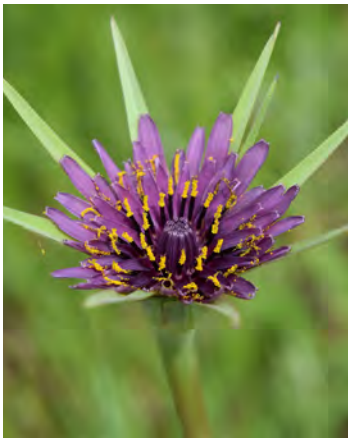

Fig. 19 *Tragopogon porrifolius*

Fig. 20 *Allium flavum*

Fig. 21 *Allium vineale*

valley on the southern edge of the Larzac, where it grows in large numbers on the steep rocky screes and down beside the track that ascends through the cirque. This species has the largest flowers of all; they are clear blue and appear earlier than many other members of the genus, at their best towards the end of May.

The numerous members of the families Papilionaceae (now Fabaceae) and Asteraceae could each have a whole book written about them, and I'm afraid that several I have photographed still remain unidentified. However, one member of the former is so striking as to almost identify itself, and that is *Trifolium stellatum* (fig. 18), with heads of star-like flowers fringed with white hairs, each looking out in a different direction; it grows widely and flowers during June. Of the Asteraceae, two species of goat's beard or tragopogon stand out: *T. porrifolius* (fig. 19) with deep-purple flowers appearing in May, and yellow *T. pratensis*, flowering from mid-May into June.

Alliums also love these dry limestone uplands, and the first to appear are the round heads of *A. sphaerocephalon* in late June, followed by *A. polyanthum* with small, tight heads of pink flowers throughout July. *Allium flavum* (fig. 20), with an open head of drooping yellow flowers and stiff brown bracts, flowers from late July into August; *A. vineale* (fig. 21) bears bunches of pink flowers streaked with green, appearing out of a head of brown bulbils and takes us through mid-August; and *A. paniculatum* produces its open heads of pale-pink flowers in late August.

Fig. 22 *Allium roseum*

Fig. 23 *Adonis flammea*

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Fig. 24 *Hepatica nobilis*

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Fig. 25 *Orchis simia*

There is one further allium I cannot possibly leave out: *A. roseum* (fig. 22) decorates many of the roadsides throughout the month of April, though it is much rarer on our uplands and one must descend 450m to find it at its best.

Most of the plants that we have discussed so far are reasonably showy, and some positively blousy. However, there is another whole world of small plants to be discovered if you look down and get on your knees. Around the edges of the limestone plateau, meadows have been carved out, and these are rested from grazing on a rotational basis. During these fallow years the meadows are covered with a multitude of tiny plants, and it was here that we first saw the diminutive *Adonis flammea* (fig. 23), with its bright-red petals and almost black centre, related to the British pheasant's eye (*Adonis annua*).

Although most habitats on the limestone tend to be sunny and dry, if you descend the steep track on the north side of the plateau you enter a dense woodland of beech and chestnut which provides deep shade for damp-loving plants such as the beautiful anemone, *Hepatica nobilis* (fig. 24). This grows on damp rock faces, often flowering during the last weeks of March. Here also can be found many of the later-flowering orchids such as the helleborines. I did say I'd avoid discussing orchids, but despite my best resolve I cannot resist sneaking in just one, photographed in the very strange spring of 2017, when weather conditions meant that though our well-known orchids were all present and flowering, they did so generally in dwarf form. The picture (fig. 25) shows two tiny monkey orchids (*Orchis simia*) sheltering below the leaf rosette of an asphodel.

Finally, I feel that I must apologise to all of the beautiful plants that have been missed out of this account.

Gordon James is a keen amateur botanist. He and his partner Jean have a small house in Southern France. They live and garden on the Suffolk coast and have both been members of the HPS and the Pulmonaria and Geranium groups for nearly ten years; Gordon edits the newsletter for the Pulmonaria Group.