Dolomitic delights

Peter Regan

I wonder what you think of when the Dolomites are mentioned. For many people, winter skiing or summer walking holidays may come to mind. It may not be the first place you'd think of to see attractive plants, yet there are many garden-worthy plants growing there. My wife and I took a holiday there in July 2011, and saw more than 100 different plants within a two-week visit. Here I'll show you some which are worth a place in the garden – in the borders, a rock garden or an alpine house.

The Dolomites are limestone mountains in the extreme north of Italy, adjacent to the Austrian border. They are an eastward continuation of the mountain chain of the Alps. We stayed in Corvara in Badia, a town roughly in the centre of the region, in chalet accommodation used by a company specialising in walking holidays – especially those in extreme conditions including the 'Via Ferrata', relics of the First World War. Although there are a number of places accessible from Corvara where flowers can be seen, we drove to several other locations during our stay in order to see as much as possible. Local buses are available and used by the company guides to get walkers to their starting points; most villages and small towns in the area have chair lifts, gondolas and cable cars which give access to higher levels.

There are usually relatively flat areas of grassland, or even farmed land, around the top of the lifts. Walking through these areas, and on woodland edges, we found the wolfsbane, *Aconitum lycoctonum* subsp. *vulparia* (fig. 1), its yellow flowers making a

Fig. 1 Wolfsbane, *Aconitum lycoctonum* subsp. *vulparia*

Fig. 2 *Aconitum napellus*

Fig. 3 *Primula farinosa*

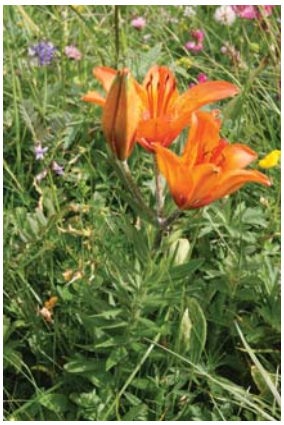

Fig. 4 *Lilium bulbiferum* var. *croceum*

Fig. 5 *Lilium martagon*

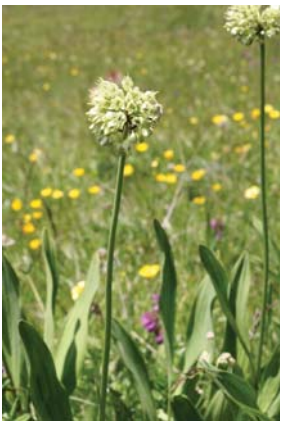

Fig. 6 *Allium victorialis*

pleasing contrast to the usual blues of this genus like *Aconitum napellus* (fig. 2). Within the woods we found *Paris quadrifolia*, a British native found in damp woods on calcareous soils and, in more open conditions, *Primula farinosa* (fig. 3) – the only primula we saw. There were also several orchids, including the lesser butterfly (*Platanthera bifolia*) and the red and pink vanilla orchids (*Gymnadenia rubra* and *G. nigra*).

When driving along a route notorious for hairpin bends (more than 30!) we spotted a group of bright flowers on a hillside. On our return we stopped to take pictures of a large patch of *Lilium bulbiferum* var. *croceum* (fig. 4), a strikingly coloured flower. Surprisingly, in view of its name, there were not many bulbils visible on the stems. In our garden we grow the tiger lily, *L. lancifolium* (once known as *L. tigrinum*), a Turk's cap lily which has bulbils in most of the leaf axils. We also grow the common European Turk's cap, *Lilium martagon,* which has naturalised in the garden, but here it seemed to occur as isolated individuals (fig. 5). There were relatively few bulbs in flower; the only others were two species from the onion family, *Allium victorialis* (fig. 6), with a not very interesting flower and, in a very wet area with a stream running through it, a mass of chives, *Allium schoenoprasum*, including a rare albino form.

Fig. 7 *Aster alpinus*

Fig. 8 *Doronicum austriacum*

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Fig. 9 *Buphthalmum salicifolium*

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Fig. 10 *Crepis aurea*

On other days we found a range of *Asteraceae*, including *Aster alpinus* (fig. 7), and two large yellow daisies, *Doronicum austriacum* (fig. 8) and *Buphthalmum salicifolium* (fig. 9). For some reason these don't seem as popular in gardens as the later-flowering species such as *Helenium, Helianthus* and *Rudbeckia*. Brighter splashes of colour were provided by *Crepis aurea* (fig. 10) and *Senecio abrotanifolius* (fig. 11), although people may be reluctant to introduce either of them into a garden, and certainly not the sadly named *Senecio squalidus*! More welcome in the garden would be *Scabiosa vestina* (Contents page) (this may be *S. lucida*), the sage *Salvia pratensis* (fig. 12), or *Anemone baldensis* (fig. 13).

Gentians were the most diverse genus we saw, with at least five species. Some blue-flowered members of the genus we photographed were *Gentiana bavarica* (fig. 14), *G. terglouensis* (fig. 15), *G. clusii* (fig. 16) and *G. utriculosa* (fig. 17). These are all very similar and probably only of interest to a specialist grower. There was also a rare UK native known as the Chiltern gentian, *Gentianella germanica* (fig. 18). Quite different,

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Fig. 11 *Senecio abrotanifolius*

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Fig. 12 *Salvia pratensis*

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Fig. 13 *Anemone baldensis*

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Fig. 15 *Gentiana terglouensis*

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Fig. 17 *Gentiana utriculosa*

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Fig. 14 *Gentiana bavarica*

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Fig. 16 *Gentiana clusii*

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Fig. 18 *Gentianella germanica*

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Fig. 19 *Gentiana punctata*

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Fig. 20 *Veratrum album*

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Fig. 21 *Phyteuma orbiculare*

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Fig. 22 *Campanula barbata*

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Fig. 23 *Campanula cochlearifolia*

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Fig. 24 *Dianthus glacialis*

Fig. 25 *Linaria alpina*

Fig. 26 *Armeria maritima*

Fig. 27 *Potentilla nitida*

Fig. 28 *Dryas octopetala*

and much taller, was *Gentiana punctata* (fig. 19), the spotted yellow-flowered gentian, which also occurs here. We have previously seen it in the Pyrennees, where it is a high-altitude plant, replacing *Gentiana lutea* as you ascend the mountains (we didn't find *G. lutea* on this trip). Both these gentians can be confused in early stages of growth with *Veratrum album* (fig. 20), as the basal leaves are similar. We grow both *G. lutea* and *V. album* in our garden.

One day we found the striking campanula relative, *Phyteuma orbiculare* (fig. 21), growing in open grassland; its relatives are in the *Plant Finder* but we have rarely seen them in gardens. More usual bellflowers were seen: *Campanula barbata* (fig. 22) in open sunny areas, and *C. cochlearifolia* in similar places but also in bare rock areas

Fig. 29 *Daphne cneorum*

Fig. 30 *Rhododendron ferrugineum*

(fig. 23). In these higher, similarly exposed places we found a deep pink *Dianthus glacialis* (fig. 24), the toadflax, *Linaria alpina* (fig. 25), and surprisingly a sea-level plant, *Armeria maritima* (fig. 26). In this environment grow attractive *Potentilla nitida* (fig. 27), which is found only on dry limestone rocks, and another plant also from the *Rosaceae* family, a double-flowered *Dryas octopetala* (fig. 28). The dwarf shrub *Daphne cneorum* (fig. 29) is similarly restricted to limestone areas in the wild, but it seems more tolerant in cultivation. Surprisingly perhaps, another dwarf shrub was from a genus usually associated with acid soils, *Rhododendron ferrugineum* (fig. 30). Although the underlying rock is limestone, not everywhere is dry, as many areas are fed by melting snow, and we discovered a large wet area on an open hillside where the globe flower, *Trollius europaeus*, grew in profusion (figs 31 & 32).

Figs 31 & 32 *Trollius europaeus*

We've been lucky enough to travel far afield in search of plants, but the Dolomites are in easier reach, almost on our European doorstep, and as you can see the botanising is excellent.

Peter Regan has been a member of the HPS for many years, serving on the Kent Group committee, the national Events Panel, and twice as Trustee. In retirement he has travelled widely to look at plants in their native environments.