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Plant encounters from a decade of travels

Răzvan Chișu

Fig. 1 Transylvanian hay meadows with *Lathyrus tuberosus*

This article is based on a talk I put together for a gardening club, but the subject matter is quite poignant at this moment in time. With no travel allowed in 2020, I have been reminiscing about my past botanical wanderings.

The obvious places to start with these are the wildflower meadows of my native Transylvania, where I spent the first three decades of my life (fig. 1). Throughout the varied landscape of this country, where traditional agricultural practices are still the norm, there are many natural plant communities that survive and thrive. Meadows are not sprayed, fertilised or 'improved' as in western Europe. They are often scythed by hand, and man-made haystacks are dotted about our villages from summer onwards.

Over 1,100 species of flowering plants occur in Transylvania, and in time

several hundred of these have made their way to the top of the Carpathian Mountains. I will mention but two: *Hepatica transsilvanica* and *Viola declinata*. The first, as its name implies, is a Transylvanian endemic,

a denizen of deciduous and coniferous woodland on the slopes of the southern and eastern Carpathians. There are several forms that have been selected and brought into cultivation, but there is still much variability



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Fig. 2 Collage of wild forms of *Hepatica transsilvanica*



Fig. 3 White-flowered form of *Viola declinata*

in wild populations left to explore (fig. 2). In the garden, give it some space in shade, as in time it spreads by underground stolons.

Viola declinata is an inhabitant of alpine pastures and rock ledges. This is a species with bright-blue flowers, that scrambles through the grass at high altitude, so imagine my surprise and excitement upon finding a white-flowered form a few years

ago on a walking holiday in the Făgăraș range (fig. 3).

From Transylvania south to Greece, and the Peloponnese in particular which is perhaps the most floriferous region I have ever been to. With a typical Mediterranean climate, from a plant perspective the Peloponnese region is at its best either in autumn, when the rains stimulate countless bulbs and annual seedlings into growth, or in spring when carpets of wildflowers, including swarms of orchids, blossom. There are truly too many for me to dwell on in detail, but I mention here some that impressed me the most:

- Sternbergias are autumn-flowering bulbs that come out roughly three weeks after the first autumn rains (fig. 4). For me here in northwest UK they only bloomed outside after the hot summer of 2018, as they need very dry, hot conditions over their rest period.



Fig. 4 *Sternbergia lutea* in olive groves on Mani peninsula



Fig. 5 Collage of different *Cyclamen graecum* leaves

- My top Greek plant must be *Cyclamen graecum*, for its sheer variety of leaf size, form and patterning. The collage in fig. 5 is of plants of this species growing on a small island the size of two football pitches, just off the coast at Gytheion. I know of people who grow this tender species successfully in their gardens, so I have recently planted several

specimens in the driest spot in my garden, between the thirsty roots of a large conifer.

- *Crocus goulimyi* (fig. 6) was only described in 1954 due to its narrow distribution in the south of the Peloponnese, on the wild and sparsely populated Mani peninsula. At its best in the last weeks of October and beginning of November, this is a species that clumps up well, is fairly easy to grow and, I'm told, in time seeds itself in the garden. Just give it a go in a dry, well-drained sunny spot!
- I know there are many galanthophiles out there, so I can't leave out the autumn-flowering *Galanthus reginae-olgae* (fig. 7). This species grows on steep stream banks under a golden canopy of oriental plane trees, just a few miles from the spot where the grim but unlikely tale has it that ancient Spartans threw their weakling babies away in the rapids.

In spring on Mani, one can't help walking on carpets of flowers scattered over the hills and olive groves. Annuals and bulbs are interwoven in countless different patterns, with wild orchids as highlights. We hear of



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Fig. 6 *Crocus goulimyi* and *C. boryi*

– and fear – the wildfires of the Mediterranean, but these open up the ground and release nutrients,

creating new plant communities that could certainly win Best in Show at Chelsea (fig. 8).



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Fig. 7 *Galanthus reginae-olgae*



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Fig. 8 Meadows bloom after wildfires



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Fig. 9 *Tulipa goulimyi* on the seashore at Cape Tenaro

Fig. 10 *Narcissus cyclamineus*

At Cape Tenaro on the southernmost tip of Mani, on warm, sunny days at the end of March one finds *Tulipa goulimyi* (fig. 9) ablaze among the low hummocks of cistus, *Euphorbia acanthothamnus* and *Sarcopoterium spinosum*. This tulip only grows on Mani and the island of Kythera. It was named after Constantine Goulimis, a Greek botanist and author.

Another frequent destination on my plant-hunting travels has been Spain. The Iberian Peninsula is a centre of evolution for Narcissus. A late-February trip to the northwestern region of Galicia a couple of years ago gave me the opportunity to see *Narcissus cyclamineus*, *N. bulbocodium* (figs 10 & 11), *N. triandrus* and *N. asturiensis* in the wild. Unfortunately, agricultural

Fig. 12 *Narcissus cantabricus*

land use here is very intensive, and these species are reduced to small, scattered populations at the edges of fields or eucalyptus plantations.

If one is in need of some winter sunshine, a trip to Andalusia in December would be a good excuse to find two other species, *Narcissus cantabricus* and the paper-white daffodil, *N. papyraceus*. The former has white flowers displaying

Fig. 11 A thriving population of *Narcissus bulbocodium* in the city of Santiago de Compostela

the typical funnel shape of the Bulbocodium section (fig. 12). It is widespread throughout Spain and North Africa, usually flowering from January to March, though there is a small, early-flowering population just west of Malaga, which starts into flower at the very end of November. *N. cantabricus* flowers are easily damaged by rain, so here in the UK it is best enjoyed in an alpine house. Paper-whites are commonly grown and sold by florists at Christmas, but it is something else entirely to come across their scented blooms in the warm Andalusian sun (fig. 13).

Though they are by language and culture identified with Portugal, Madeira and the Azores are archipelagos in what is known in biogeographical terms as Macaronesia. Due to their isolation over millions of years they have developed a particular flora with high numbers of endemics. But since colonisation in the last five hundred years or so, many alien species have been introduced, and have thrived in the congenial climate, as ever to the detriment of the more specialised natives.

Though dormant, the backbone of volcanoes that make up Madeira still profoundly influences the island. As the moisture-laden trade winds hit the high peaks, most of the rain



Fig. 13 *Narcissus papyraceus* near Benahavis, Andalusia



Fig. 14 The laurisilva on Madeira

falls on the northern side, leaving the southern slopes sunny and dry. The moist, misty climate in the north is where the laurel forest or 'laurisilva' thrives (fig. 14). Due to the local climate and its isolated position, this prehistoric plant community has survived here, tens of thousands of years after it disappeared from mainland Europe.

In the laurisilva, various evergreen tree and shrub species abound, their trunks and branches festooned with mosses, lichens and ferns.



Fig. 15 *Woodwardia radicans* fronds



Fig. 16 *Geranium maderense* adorning an abandoned ruin at Ribeira de Vaca



Fig. 17 *G. maderense* flowers

One such is *Woodwardia radicans*, a large fern in a genus of around 14 species spread throughout the northern hemisphere. They are known as chain ferns because of the chain-like arrangement of sporangia on the abaxial side of their fronds¹ (fig. 15). These long, cascading fronds can grow to 2m in length and, where their tips touch the ground, they will often form a rhizome that roots, and in time forms a new plant.

As impressive, if not more so, is the endemic *Geranium maderense*. In its native haunts it grows to 1.5m in height, with huge

¹ Fern fronds often bear sporangia, where the plant's spores are formed, usually on the underside (abaxial surface) of the leafy segments, but sometimes marginally or scattered over the frond.

inflorescences consisting of hundreds of bright-pink flowers (figs 16 & 17). Thriving in Madeira's mild climate, it is a tender species and yet, due to climate change, it is gradually being grown further north in the UK (I know of at least two gardens in Cheshire where it is grown outdoors in sheltered positions).

The giant canary buttercup, *Ranunculus cortusifolius* (fig. 18), grows to a height of around 1m on the mountainside, but in the shaded and sheltered valleys in the north of the island I have seen specimens flowering at almost double that height. The large, bright-yellow flowers (5cm or more across) prompted the species description in the *Curtis Botanical Magazine* of 1852 as the handsomest of all buttercups known to date (fig. 19). Occasionally one comes across seeds, but sadly it is not widespread in cultivation.

The Azores lie several hundred miles northwest of Madeira. They have a more limited native flora, which is currently under threat from invasives such as *hedychium* (fig. 20), *tropaeolum*, *ipomoea*, even tree ferns. Several native species are worth mentioning, including the impressive *Angelica lignescens*. This giant of the genus is extremely rare, growing at altitude around lagoas – volcanic lakes surrounded by forests – in ravines but also along paths and mountain roads.



Fig. 18 *Ranunculus cortusifolius*



Fig. 19 *R. cortusifolius* flowers



Fig. 20 Invasive *Hedychium* takes over entire hillsides



Fig. 21 Author with *Angelica lignescens*

A member of the carrot family, it makes huge mounds of greenish blooms (think alexanders), but is impressive even when out of flower (fig. 21).

The Azores have a mild, moist oceanic climate, and ferns thrive here. Of particular interest are the filmy ferns or Hymenophyllaceae, which have evolved to thrive in extremely damp and shady conditions. The light levels on the forest floor, or at the mouth of caves and fissures in the rocks, are so low that the fronds of these ferns are only one cell layer thick. They are translucent, especially when wet by the rain or mist (fig. 22).

Being so thin, they can only survive in these very humid conditions. Talk about extreme specialisation!

To round off, I return to the UK, and I must acknowledge that, despite the severe depletion of wilderness here due to millennia of intensive land use, limited but impressive pockets still exist where one can experience the thrill of being surrounded by wild plant communities. One such is in the protected sand dunes at Newborough Warren, on the island of Anglesey. With the mountains of Snowdonia as a backdrop, this is a stunning nature reserve, where in summer



Fig. 22 *Vandeboschia radicans* frond

one comes across orchids such as *Epipactis palustris*, *Anacamptis pyramidalis* and various *Dactylorhiza* species, growing alongside the carnivorous *Pinguicula vulgaris*, ericaceous *Pyrola rotundifolia* (fig. 23) and the dune pansy, *Viola tricolour* subsp. *curtisii*, all thriving in the poor, sandy soil. A community perhaps worth mimicking in a sunny gravel bed at home?

Even closer to my home, on just a brief neighbourhood walk in fact, there is a tiny remnant of ancient woodland enclosed on all sides by a green desert of cattle pasture. Here, last spring, the mass of bluebells and wood anemones were a great solace during our first lockdown; a reminder that we are lucky if we don't have to travel far to enjoy nature (fig. 24).

It's not easy to distil ten years of plant-hunting down to a few pages, and I've had to leave out many of my favourites. The memories and images remain though, and perhaps another time I will be able to write about the gardens I visited, and the people I met on my travels. 🌿



Fig. 23 *Pyrola rotundifolia*



Fig. 24 Bluebells and wood anemones nearer home

Răzvan Chișu, a self-confessed plantaholic, is a professional horticulturist, speaker and botanical tour leader. He grew up in Transylvania but his passion for plants and gardens brought him to the UK, where he is an active member of many plant societies. He is currently writing a book on Romanian alpins and developing a Transylvanian meadow at his home in Cheshire. You can follow his plant adventures on Instagram.