

WEST MEETS EAST PART ONE



Cistus creticus, Antalya



Narcissus cantabricus, Andalucia

We have written a lot on the Mediterranean, a place that we not only live in but one whose richness we have a tremendous admiration for. Our studies of the region have shown us an intriguing blend of commonality and complexity, a combination that adds up to over 25,000 species of vascular plants. Of the commonality, what is interesting is not only that many species exhibit similar adaptations to the summer drought (the climate factor that defines the flora) but also the presence of many pan-Mediterranean species that can be found almost everywhere in the region. Examples include; *Cistus creticus*, *C. salviifolius*, *Pistaccia lentiscus*, *Spartium junceum*, *Arbutus unedo*, *Euphorbia characias* and *Lavandula stoechas*, *Pancreatium maritimum*, many orchids and *Narcissus tazetta* as well as annual species such as *Calendula arvensis*. The keen-eyed among you will have noticed *Cistus creticus* (Cretan rockrose) and *Spartium junceum* (Spanish broom) two plants that are most certainly not confined to Crete or Spain respectively. Many more genera have very similar relatives (or floral elements) that occur throughout, such as *Phlomis*, *Quercus*, *Salvia*, *Echium* and *Euphorbia*. However, there are far more species with limited or very restricted ranges.

Broadly speaking, the Mediterranean could be looked at as a large dumbbell with the twin botanical heavyweights of the Iberian Peninsula (and Morocco) on one end and Greece and Turkey



Narcissus bulbocodium, Donana, Spain



Scilla peruviana, near Tarifa, Spain



Scilla peruviana, near Tarifa, Spain



Fritillaria lusitana, near Ronda, Spain.



Cyclamen repandum, Paklenica, Croatia



Crocus corsicus, Col de Bavella, Corsica

(and the Levant) at the other end. Taking geophytes as an example, there is a distinct bias of particular genera. To the east we find *Fritillaria*, *Colchicum* and *Crocus* in greater richness. Nonetheless, of the few in the west they include the stunning *Crocus corsicus*, *C. nevadensis* and *Fritillaria lusitana* which has an elegant grace. I've found the latter alongside the shell-pink endemic orchid *Orchis olbiensis* in the limestone hills near Ronda. As well as localised endemics and the many regional forms are more widespread orchids, their tiny seeds having allowed them to spread across a large part of the region, so that we can find *Ophrys tenthredifera*, *O. scolopax*, *O. speculum*, *O. fusca* and representatives of the confusing muddle of *O. sphegodes* in Andalusia and Antalya and many places in between. Studying orchids can be a headache at times, but these beauties offer a reassuring familiarity whenever we find them in the Med.

In the west the relatively few members of the predominantly eastern geophyte genera mentioned above are enhanced no end by that herald of spring the *Narcissus*. The Iberian Peninsula (and western North Africa) contains the majority of the world's thirty-six (or so) *Narcissus* species, a genus that originally split from *Sternbergia* (now more numerous in the east). Here the damp springtime sands or seeps are crowded with the delicate cups of *Narcissus bulbocodium* a species that morphs into an array of forms across its



Orchis olbiensis, near Ronda, Spain.



White village in Andalusia



Colchicum lusitanicum, Morocco.



Dipcadi serotinum, near Barbate, Spain.



Narcissus assoanus, Sierra de la Nieves, Spain



Helleborus foetidus, Sierra de la Nieves, Spain

range. The even lovelier *N. cantabricus* is an earlier flowering white gem, which couldn't be more different from the showy, powerfully scented *N. papyraceus* that stands in wet grasslands and stream sides at the same time. And then there is the suite of smaller yellow species such as *N. assoanus* filling limestone crevices or sweetly-fragrant but almost unpronounceable *N. cuatrecasii*. Other include dense stands of highly-scented *N. cordubensis* (jonquilla). Garden favourites such as the distinctive *N. cyclamineus* are now rare in wild. Altogether larger and more familiar (and what we might call daffodils) are the complex of species that include *Narcissus hispanicus* and *N. minor*, forerunners of our garden cultivars. The former grow with *Helleborus foetidus*, *Romulea bulbocodium* and *N. assoanus* near Ronda in a delightful botanical hotspot that later on in spring also sees *Iris xiphium* rub shoulders in damp sward with that bruiser of a squill; *Scilla peruviana*. Nothing can quite match this hefty and impressive swirl of mauve-blue and there are a good number of (smaller) squills in the region, along with subtler offerings of more African origin, namely *Dipcadi serotinum*. We've seen both of these in early spring too, the former preferring damp grassland the latter sandy flats alongside sheets of golden *Lotus creticus* and pink *Silene colorata* (two more pan-Mediterranean plants) close to areas of umbrella pines with daintier squills such as *Scilla ramburii* or the pretty bells of *Acis triphyllum*.

None of these can be found to the east. What is interesting is that although that ultimate traveller of daffodils; *Narcissus tazetta* spans the region (possibly aided by humankind in the past), there are no naturally occurring yellow-flowered species at all in the east. This might suggest that the absence of pollinators to the east has limited their spread. It may well be the case, although other factors affect whether a plant can grow in any given area, such as pests, diseases and competition from existing flora. As elsewhere in the Mediterranean, there is a good showing of autumn-flowering species too, with oddities like *Narcissus viridiflorus* growing with *Acis autumnalis* and chequered *Colchicum lusitanicum* (though many more similar *Colchicum* are fond to the east). Except for tiny yellow *N. cavanillesii*, most other autumn species are white, for example *Narcissus elegans* and *N. obsoletus*, the latter reaching Greece and SW Turkey.

We have only discussed (a tiny part) the first half of the region, but already the dilemmas of this fascinating region are clear; where to go, when to go and how often! We are far from finished exploring ourselves, and adding criteria such as fine food, idyllic landscapes and quaint villages to seeing beautiful flora doesn't help either - they are all equally pan-mediterranean too. Chris will be making a start with Andalusia this March, castanets not required.