

Acis trichophylla

WEST MEETS EAST PART TWO





Cistanche lutea, Nijar, Spain



Narcissus triandrus, Santa Elena, Spain

Journeying east cross the Mediterranean, there is a combination of continuity and change in the plant life. We mentioned the pan-Mediterranean plants in the last post and in Andalucia this year (where we just couldn't resist including a few photos from the trip) we saw examples such as *Euphorbia characias*, *Cistus salviifolius*, *Calycotome villosa*, *Spartium junceum*, *Tuberaria guttata* and *Quercus coccifera* all of which we see locally in Turkey. Not only these but a suite of familiar orchids; *Ophrys fusca*, *O. scolopax*, *O. tenthredinifera* and *Himantoglossum robertianum*, all plants that one could find across a great sweep of the region. And, even if not the exact same species there are many similar, closely-related species. Thus, juxtaposing lovely displays of *Narcissus*, *Acis* and *Scilla*, were the lovely crisp saucers of *Cistus ladanifer* and *C. albidus*, the latter very alike *C. creticus* a common species in the east, whilst *Quercus rotundifolia* very much filled the niche (and appearance) of *Q. infectoria* in Turkey. So on and so forth.

As mentioned last time; for all of this commonality there is a big shift in some plants, especially geophytes. Take the irises we were seeing; *Iris xiphium* and *I. planifolia*. The latter is the most westerly of the scorpirises, a group of irises far better represented in the eastern Mediterranean, Iran and on into Central Asia. The same can be said for *Fritillaria*, *Tulipa*, *Crocus*, *Galanthus*,



Cistus ladanifer, Santa Elena, Spain



Narcissus bujei, near Ronda, Spain



Scilla peruviana, near Tarifa, Spain.



Antirrhinum tortuosum, Barbate, Spain



Cyclamen alpinum, near Antalya, Turkey



Sternbergia candida, Baba Dagi, Turkey

Colchicum and also *Cyclamen*. Geography no doubt plays its part, the eastern reaches of the Med have had strong influence from western Asia, none more so than Turkey and Greece, which both have a rich geophyte flora (along with a great many other plants). The exceptional Mediterranean flora of Greece and south-west Turkey is helped along by myriad twists and turns of the coast, hundreds of islands and complex mountain orientations that between create the perfect conditions for diverse and often isolated niches and microclimates.

Old World *Fritillaria* have their epicentre in Turkey, with a good number in Greece too, but drop off fast as we move west. This year we caught up with the dainty *Fritillaria forbesii* on Baba Dagi, just below where we had seen a wonderful slope dressed in ivory *Sternbergia candida*. Similar *F. carica* is very common on the limestone of the Taurus, as is larger *F. acmopetala* (itself rather similar to the Spanish *F. lusitanica*), whilst we can find *F. elwesii*, *F. pinardii*, localised *F. asumaniae* and *F. crassifolia* all within a one hour drive of where we live. The latter enjoys stony slopes and scree and we know a fantastic spot where they grow together with fragrant *Muscari racemosa*, above hummocks of cerise *Onobrychis cornuta*, the silvery wands of *Asphodeline taurica* and the rare endemic *Glaucium alakurensis* - a sweetly fragrant poppy, something that is rather unusual. The flowers are indeed a more muted soft orange with plum-



Fritillaria forbesii, Baba Dagi, Turkey.



Crocus pelistericus, Mount Voras.



Crocus sieberi, Mount Voras.



Corydalis solida, Mount Voras, Greece



Colchicum cilicicum, southern Turkey.



Wurmbea elatior, South Africa.

coloured blotches and it mostly likely uses scent rather garish colours to entice pollinators. On slightly higher slopes there are plentiful *Tulipa armena* too, abundant *Muscari bourgaei*, *Corydalis erdelii* and a smattering of *Crocus lyciataurica*. The latter genus really explodes in diversity in south-west Turkey with a confusion of (newly-named) taxa, but it is clear from some populations they are naturally variable. Clearer cut taxa include the singular *C. baytopiorum* and gorgeous ice-blue beauty that appears in February-March, along with an array of others; *C. sarichinensis*, *C. brickellii*, *C. fleischeri* and the rather small *C. danfordiae*. Many more lie to the east along the Taurus, but diverse though the Turkish species are, we have yet to see grander displays than occur in Greece. Here the spine of the Pindos is decorated with countless *Crocus sieberi* and *C. veluchensis* in April, accompanied in the far north with sheets of deep violet *C. pelistericus*. At the same location, the violet yields to drifts of scarlet *Geum coccineum* in July. Both Greece and Turkey also have many autumn-flowering *Crocus*, with the southern Peloponnese the standout location, a wonderful compact geographical area where crocuses, sternbergias, cyclamen and colchicums rub shoulders in a frenetic late season flurry.

The latter two genera are even better represented in Turkey, which is very much the land of the *Cyclamen* with a dozen species and over forty species of *Colchicum* including the showy large-flowered chequered taxa such as *C. variegatum* and *C. cilicicum*. These are rather reminiscent of *C. lusitanicum* from the western Mediterranean, but there are far more species to be found in the east. *Colchicum* rumble on into Iran, but have a abrupt shift when they reach Central Asia, gone is the familiar pink instead replaced by gold (*C. luteum*) or two tone purple and white (*C. kesselringianum*). Interestingly, the same thing happens north to south, with the many species of Colchicaceae in South Africa coming in striking gold (e.g. *Baeometra uniflora* or the weird and wonderful *Sandersonia aurantiaca*) or the white and purple stars of *Wurmbea*. The representatives of *Colchicum* itself are rather dowdy and peculiar semi-desert dwellers.

Remaining with Eurasia, the Mediterranean yields to the endless steppes of Asia, a region of equally endless potential for botanical journeys and the lure of Silk Road lands never quite lets go. This its Xinjiang in far western China and some anticipated rare *Fritillaria* and *Erythronium*. This is also the furthest extent of another genus - Tulipa, whose greatest diversity is also Central Asia, but is also well-represented in the eastern Mediterranean. The gold of *Tulipa australis* is to be seen all across the Mediterranean and beyond, but quite how much of its range is truly native and how much it has been spread around by our own activities,



Tulipa cypria, northern Cyprus.



Tulipa orphanidea, near Antalya, Turkey.

who knows. Like other showy plants they have been cultivated for centuries and thus moved around. The ones we found on coarse screes in Croatia last year seemed wild enough. In Greece, there is the unparalleled display of *Tulipa saxatilis* on the Omalos Plateau in Crete to enjoy, though this is very much a product of land clearance and heavy grazing. Forms of *T. orphanidea* appear in fields here, but the real deal can be found on rocky slopes such as in south-west Turkey, an almost unphotographable intense red in sunlight! And the diversity of tulips increases as we move east, with species such as *T. armena* spanning a wide stretch of the Taurus, interspersed with localised gems such as *T. cinnabarina* (one I've yet to track down). On Cyprus there is the sumptuous *T. cypria*. Most others fall into the Irani-Turano floristic province (i.e. steppe) of Asia and Crimea and are not true Med plants, but there has always been considerable merging of climate and floristic boundaries here, something that has contributed to the greater diversity of certain geophyte families in the east. This eastern bulwark has provided a continuous genetic flow across a vast area of similar latitude. By comparison, in the western Mediterranean, diverse though it is, it is instead hemmed in by the Atlantic Ocean and can derive little if anything from a westerly direction. That said, I hope the last two posts have shown that both 'ends' offer different experiences of the Mediterranean and I for one am as happy to celebrate finding great plants with a glass of rioja as I am toasting a good day out with a questionable red in a Greek taverna. Cheers!

Tulipa saxatilis, Crete, Greece.

