The trip that almost wasn't, post-pandemic reflections: Autumn Bulbs in the Peloponnese.

## 29<sup>th</sup> October to 7<sup>th</sup> November 2022

#### Introduction:

I would like to start by expressing my great thanks to the Merlin Trust and the Alpine Garden Society for my position on the tour to the Peloponnese. It was a life changing experience. I learnt so much from the tour leaders and fellow guests about the flora of the region and made memories and friends for life.



The attendees of the 2022 AGS autumn bulbs Peloponnese tour, Mt Hymettos, Overlooking Athens

My name is Matthew Jeffery, and I am currently the UK Tree Seed Collecting field officer working for the Millennium Seed Bank after a recent career change from horticulture. I worked in the Alpine department at Kew for five years spending time across the nursery, Rock Garden, and aquatic garden.

I am very grateful to have been awarded the travel bursary to travel to the Peloponnese. This was not the first destination I had originally applied for, but ultimately, I wouldn't change a thing.

I initially applied for the Merlin Trust AGS joint tour to the North American Rockies in February 2020, little did we know that within a month the world would change, and it wouldn't be until November 2022 that I could safely travel with the AGS.

I was very grateful that the funding was held for me and then I was allowed to pick an alternative destination for travel once the AGS had recommenced their tours.

I quite quickly decided to choose the autumn bulb tour of the Peloponnese for several reasons. I have a great interest in the flora of the Mediterranean due to my experience working on the Rock Garden and with the diverse Mediterranean plant collections at Kew. This drought tolerant flora is also of particular interest to me having gardened entirely in London. The incremental increase in temperature extremes and decrease in rainfall as climate change takes hold, make this flora a potentially invaluable suite of plants for climate adaptable horticulture. I also have a real interest in ancient human history and culture, the Peloponnese is rich in archaeology and steeped in the myth and legend of ancient civilisations.

On a personal note, even though I do not have Greek heritage, I was born and brought up in a very Greek Cypriot area of North London, so Greek food and culture feel very much like home. All these factors combined rather fatefully to make the Peloponnese an irresistible destination for me, and I was certainly not disappointed.

I had known the tour leaders Razvan Chisu and Christopher Grey-Wilson from previous AGS related meetings and travels, so I already knew the wealth of knowledge and experience they possess. Joining an organised tour like this meant we were able to maximise the number of different plants and habitats we were able to see in the short time we were there. I was able to see things that just wouldn't be achievable as an independent traveller and would take quadruple the time to find. Our driver Panayiotis was also incredible in his ability to manoeuvre the minibus safely to quite remote destinations. He demonstrated extreme patience dealing with a group of people terribly afflicted by plant obsessive compulsions, stopping regularly for us, and even showing us a beautiful new location of Cyclamen crassifolium near to his father's house amongst olive groves.

For me the main highlights of the trip were seeing large drifts of bulbs in their natural habitat amongst the landscape. Seeing the combinations and density of the plants in the wild is really inspiring for me to inform my preferred style of naturalistic horticulture.

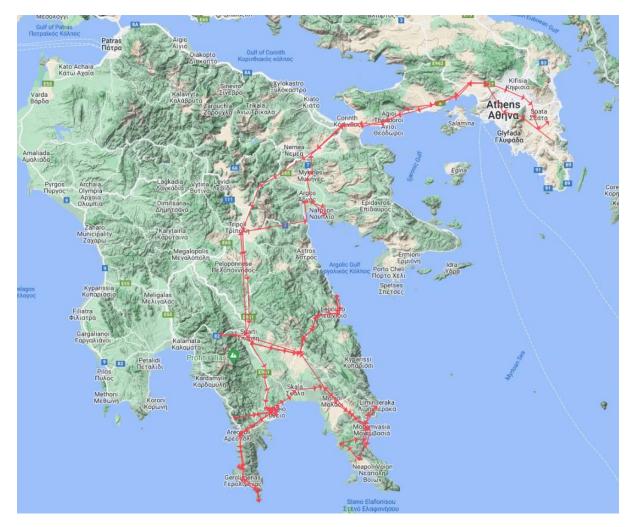
Even though I now do not work in horticulture directly, I still have a great passion for all things horticultural and still work for the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. The tour to the Peloponnese really reinforced my love for plants and the ecology of the natural world. I have bought this passion strongly into my new role at Kew: conserving the UK's native woody flora though the tree seed collecting project at the Millennium Seed Bank. Visiting the wild habitats of the Peloponnese has made me more acutely aware of their diverse nature and even more passionate to wholeheartedly contribute to the conservation of the last remnant natural areas we have in the UK. Seeing how many of the bulbous plants and other wild plants were allowed to thrive amongst the ancient, cultivated olive groves gave me hope that the plants of the UK can be given more unhindered passage across our highly agricultural landscape.

#### The trip itinerary:

The first map below shows the locations across the Peloponnese and near Athens we visited with the dates on each pin. We started in Athens and went right down two of the peninsulas, the Mani peninsula to the West and Cape Maleas to the East.



The topographical map below illustrates the extremely mountainous nature of the region, this makes for stunning scenery and a diverse range of habitats and ecosystems promoting high levels of diversity and endemism.



# Day one:



View across Athens from Mount Hymettos.

Starting in Athens, we got of the flight and immediately drove up the nearest mountain: Oros Merenta. I was stunned to see so much diversity immediately so close to an airport and large city. This was the first time I have been to the Mediterranean for plants and since I had acquired some more knowledge, so I was seeing it with fresh eyes: there was so much! It was like a Mediterranean garden with some of the typical plants you would expect; *Thymus, Ballota, Verbascum, Teucrium spinosum* and *Euphorbia myrsinites*. We were immediately faced with the plants for which the trip was built around: autumn flowering bulbs. We found two different *Colchicum (cupanii and psaridis*) as well as two different *Crocus (cancellatus ssp. Mazziaricus and cartwrightianus*). One plant I was very excited to see was *Cyclamen graecum*, the Greek Cylclamen. We had this species growing in abundance outside on the rock garden at Kew and seeing it in its natural environment was very special. Once we got to Athens, we went up Mount Hymettos to take in the spectacular views across the city.

## Day two:



Crossing the Corinth Canal was spectacular.

Leaving Athens early in the morning drove southwards to Sparti via the Langada gorge.

We made a pilgrimage to the Langada Gorge in the hope of finding an autumn flowering species of snowdrop (*Galanthus reginae-olgae*) ... and we found it, in vast numbers!

It was growing underneath the most beautiful forest of plane trees (*Platanus orientalis*), which is native to the area. Plane trees are considered sacred in Greece, planted in churchyards and squares as symbols of longevity, providing cool shade. Plane trees are even mentioned by Homer in the Iliad and Hippocrates was reputed to teach lessons under the shade of one. The woodland certainly felt a very quiet, still, and sacred place.



Galanthus reginae-olgae in the Langada gorge.

When we got back to our hotel in Sparti we all met as a group and discussed the plants we had seen during the day, we continued this every evening for the rest of the trip. This was useful and helped me to remember all the species I had seen and share with my new friends. The product of this was a plant list which I have included at the end of the report.

## Day Three:

We had another early start, and we spent the day crossing over the Parnon Mountain range to get to the east coast of Cape Maleas to a town called Tyros north of Leonidio, we saw many plants on the way. This took some very skilled driving from our driver Pany. We started by looking at hundreds of *Cyclamen graecum* with giant tubers growing in the local olive groves.



Cyclamen graecum in an olive grove

In the mountains we saw *Crocus, Colchicum* as well as wild pear (*Pyrus amygdaliformis*, evergreen maple (*Acer sempervirens*) and mistletoe growing on a pine tree (*Viscum album ssp. abietis*). When we got to the coast there were some amazing structures that were once grain stores that had incredible views over the bay.

**Day Four:** Our hotel in Sparti was near to the ancient, ruined town of Mistras, so we started our day exploring the ruins (and plants) of the town. The atmosphere here was incredible, and the protection afforded to the site allowed the plants to thrive with less disturbance. We saw many plants on the

walk around the village, including another plant I had cultivated at Kew Allium callimischon, a strange onion that flowers in the autumn after it has gone dormant.



Allium callimischon and the view from Mistras over Sparti



After Mistras, we went southwards to Gytheo, the next place we were staying to start our exploration of the Mani peninsula over the coming days.

On arrival in Gytheo we went to a nearby beach where there is a shipwreck of a cargo vessel. On the beach dunes we saw some *Sternbergia*, *Pancratium maritimum* in seed and our first autumn daffodil: *Narcissus tazetta* (it smelled incredible!).



Shipwreck of the Dimitrios and Narcissus tazetta



**Day Five:** This was a very full day, we ended up driving all the way down the Mani peninsula all the way to the end. The day started with our driver taking us to see an area of cyclamen that was near to his parents' farm. We wouldn't have found them otherwise. These Cyclamen tuned out to be a very thick leaf subspecies of *Cyclamen hederifolium* known as *crassifolium*, the flowers were also much larger and stockier. (See pictures below)





Nearby to the Cyclamen we also saw a beautiful species of oak with the large acorns with incredibly ornate caps.



We then proceeded to drive further southwards stopping at many places on the way.

One of the most special were some olive groves near Oitylo that have had minimal intervention and were just full of the most incredible drifts of *Sternbergia lutea*. Amongst the rocks around the olive trees were many more delightful plants including a dryland fern *Cheilanthes catanensis*, *Asparagus tenuifolius* and many Crocus (white *C. niveus* and purple *C. goulimyi*).

There was also the rather strange aroid: *Arisarum vulgare*, which I was familiar with from growing in pots in the alpine department at Kew.



Sternbergia lutea in the olive groves



Crocus goulymi and Arisarum vulgare



After the stunning olive groves, we went southwest on the peninsula to the coast, stopping off at Cape Tigani. We saw an area that is virtually frost free, promoting the growth of non-hardy species such as *Euphorbia dendroides* that are killed off further in land.



Euphorbia dendroides

We also saw another autumn flowering daffodil: *Narcissus deficiens (obsoletus)*, which like its cousins, had a lovely, sweet scent.



Narcissus deficiens (obsoletus)

At the very southern tip of the Mani peninsula are some Roman ruins of a spa including a well-preserved mosaic. There were also many more *Cylcamen graecum* and *Prospero autumnale*, but this time the *subsp latifolia*.



Roman Mosaic and Cyclamen graecum





Prospero (Scilla) autumnale subsp. Latifolia.

After our day down the Mani peninsula, we drove back up to the eastern corner of the peninsula to our hotel in Gytheio.

## Day Six:

After our very busy day the day before we took it slightly easier and looked at local plants around our hotel. We went onto an island in the bay in front of the hotel called Cranae Island. This has an extreme abundance of Cyclamen graecum, many with very interesting leaf patterns and shapes.

We went into the hills up and around Gytheio and found a stunning Mediterranean scrub habitat with some *Colchicum parlatoris* and *Spiranthes spiralis* orchids.



Colchicum parlatoris, Spiranthes spiralis and all the leaf forms of Cyclamen graecum on Cranae Is.



**Day Seven:** We drove from Gytheio to Monemvasia stopping at a few excellent autumn flowering Crocus sites on the way. We also saw a beautiful heather flowering by the roadside: *Erica manipuliflora*, *Coridothymus capitatus* and our first *Urginea maritima* in flower (we had seen many in leaf earlier on in the trip). We saw many more *Cyclamen* (*graecum and hederifolium*).



Erica manipuliflora, Crocus boryi and Crocus goulimyi









Crocus boryi, Crocus goulimyi ssp. leucanthus, Urginea maritima, Coridothymus capitatus





As we were approaching Monemvasia we passed through a very agricultural lowland area with many groves of orange trees and more olives, unfortunately, olives are quite susceptible to Phytophthora, a pathogenic fungus in the soil causing root and crown rot. It has been devastating livelihoods across the Mediterranean and killing many large ancient olive trees. I felt very lucky and privileged to be able to see the specimen below which is hundreds (if not a thousand) years old!

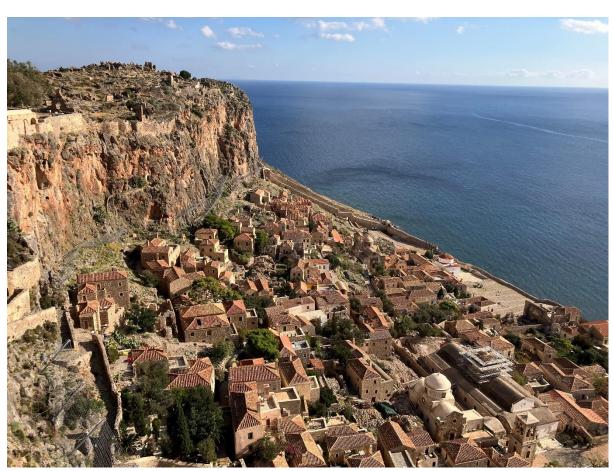


Ancient olive tree (Olea europaea), collection of Cyclamen flowers



## Day Eight:

This was our last full day of plant exploring, we took the opportunity to explore the tied island of Monemvasia where we were staying. The main part of the currently inhabited town is within ancient walls dating from the 6<sup>th</sup> century making it the oldest continuously inhabited fortified towns in Europe. Above the inhabited walled town, on a large plateau are the ruins of older buildings, many of which Byzantine. In a similar way to the ruins of Mistras, because this plateau is paid-for-entry, it means it has a certain level of protection for the plants which grow there. It was a haven for a wide selection of Mediterranean flora. This was dominated in areas by *Phlomis fruticosa*, *Thymus*, *Lavendula*, *Centranthus ruber* and giant fennel: *Ferula communis* (in seed). There were also two different *Stachys* (*chrysantha* and *spritzenhoferi*), often found growing from the old walls and on stones. In many of the open gravelly areas we found abundant *Sternbergia lutea* and the tiny *Colchicum cupanii*. There were also wild chives (*Allium ampeloprasum*) and of course, more *Cyclamen graecum* and *hederifolium*. There was also a beautiful fruiting species of *Ephedra* (*foeminea*). I am particularly interested in *Ephedera*, having studied the evolution of plants, the Genus is remarkably ancient in its lineage. This Genus and a few related ones are the only surviving members of an Order of plants at the tips of an almost lost branch of the plant family tree.



View from the upper plateau of Monemvasia overlooking the inhabited area of the island.



Ephedra foemina, Sternbergia lutea and Colchicum cupanii on the Monemvasia plateau





One of the ruined walls of the old buildings on the Monemvasia plateau

# Day Nine:

We spent much of this day travelling northwards on our way back up towards Athens, our final hotel was in the coastal city of Nafplio, but we took the opportunity to visit the ancient city of Mycenae on the way. I was very excited to visit this seat of ancient civilisation. The earliest remains on the site date back over 7000 years ago to the Neolithic age. The majority of the large archaeological remains and architecture dates from the Bronze age, some 3500 years ago, when this site was the centre of a Mediterranean civilisation, we now call the Mycenaean empire. This city is talked about in the Homeric epics and had trade with distant cultures across the ancient world. The echoes of their culture are still reflected today in our legends and the modern Greek identity.

I felt very lucky and privileged to have the opportunity to visit this place and it was an extraordinary way to finish an extraordinary trip.



Me standing underneath the main entrance to the ancient city. These are called the 'Cyclopean walls' because the people believed the stones were so large that only a cyclops would have been strong enough to have put them into place.



Campanula topaliana growing amongst the rocks and the Tomb of Clytemnestra a Mycenaean tholos type tomb approx. 1250 BC.



#### Final remarks:

I would just like to reiterate my earlier sentiment of great thanks to the Merlin Trust and Alpine Garden Society for allowing me to attend this extraordinary trip.

I would like to personally thank Rebecca Slack (Merlin Trust Secretary) for her continual updates over the years of the pandemic and her constant reassurance that I would get to travel with the Merlin Trust and AGS. Having the prospect of a plant trip over the horizon really helped me to get through the unknown depths of the covid lockdowns.

I would also like to thank Christopher Grey-Wilson and Razvan Chisu who were perfect tour leaders and guides to the flora, constantly showing off their extensive knowledge of the region and its plants. I have also extensively utilised their plant list of the trip to infill the gaps in my own (Thank you both!).

Finally, I would like to thank the rest of the wonderful people who were on the trip with us who all brought their own skills and personalities to the group, making it thoroughly enjoyable. Thank you, Sheena, Aaron, Franny, Ian, Herbert, Glen, Dan, Irene, Tony, Anne, and of course, Panayiotis our skilled driver.

This trip was highly influential for me in the way it rekindled my interest in the flora (and archaeology... and cuisine) of the Mediterranean and Greece.

In an ever changing and warming climate, knowing more about plants that are so adapted to higher levels of sun, heat and less water will be invaluable in our decision-making process of how we approach the landscapes and gardens of future Britain.

	Plant list				
Day	Date	Region	location	Species	
1	29 <sup>th</sup> Oct	Athens	Oros Merenta	Ballota Colchicum cupanii Colchicum psaridis Coridothymus capitatus Crocus cancellatus ssp. mazziaricus Crocus cartwrightianus Cyclamen graecum Teucrium spinosum Quercus coccifera	
	coth		Mt Hymettos	Armeria sp. Centranthus angustifolius Ephedra foiminii Euphorbia acanthothamnos Euphorbia myrsinites Scilla (Prospero) autumnalis Urginea maritima	
2	30 <sup>th</sup> Oct	Athens to Sparta	Corinth Canal	Cyclamen graecum  Prospero autumnalis	
		Sparta	Manthyrea	Crocus biflorus ssp. melantherus Crocus hadriaticus Quercus coccifera Salvia verbenaca Scilla (Prospero) autumnalis Stachys candida Sternbergia sicula Teucrium polium Vinca herbacea	
			Langada Gorge	Aubretia gracilis Campanula topaliana Clinopodium menthifolium Cyclamen graecum Cyclamen hederifolium Dittrichia graeolens Euphorbia rigida (+ Spurge hawk moth catepillars) Galanthus reginae-olgae Iris cretensis (in If) Pinus sylvestris ssp. Pallasiana Quercus pubescens	

3	31 <sup>st</sup> Oct	Parnon Range from	Olive orchard near Sparta	Cyclamen graecum
		Sparta	Near Kosmas	Abies cephalonica Acer sempervirens Ajuga chamaepitys Arbutus unedo Atractylis cancellata Bellis sylvestris Colchicum boissieri Colchicum cupanii Cotinus coggygria Crocus biflorus ssp. melantherus Crocus laevigatus Cupressus sempervirens Cyclamen graecum Cyclamen hederifolium Dianthus viscidus Juniperus drupaceus Micromeria marginata Pinus cembra Pinus pinaster Pinus pines Pyrus amygdaliformis Scilla (Prospero) autumnalis Teucrium polium (in fr) Viscum album ssp. Abietis
			Eastern Coast north of Leonidio	Allium ampeloprasum Phyllyrea angustifolia Pistacia lentiscus Pistacia terebinthus Selaginella cf. denticulata Smilax aspera Urginea maritima (in lf)
4	1 <sup>st</sup> Nov	Mistras and beyond	Mistras	Acer sempervirens Allium callimischon Asphodelus microcarpus (in fr) Campanula rupicola Campanua versicolor Crocus boryi Cyclamen hederifolium Ferula communis (in fr) Hypericum empetrifolium Lactuca viminea Lunaria annua ssp. pachyrhiza Nigella damascena (in fr)

				Onosma frutescens (in fr) Polypodium cambricum Plumbago europaea Ptilostemon chamaepeuce Ruscus aculeatus Scilla (Prospero) autumnalis Stachys candida Verbena officinalis
			Gytheo (Glyfada Beach)	Allium callimischon Ceratonia siliqua Crocus boryi Cheilanthes Heliotropium europaeum Narcissus tazetta Nerium oleander Pancratium maritimum Ptilostemon chamaepeuce Scilla (Prospero) autumnalis Sternbergia sicula Thymelaea tartonrara Tribulus terrestris
5	2 <sup>nd</sup> Nov	Mani Peninsula	Myrsini	Arbutus unedo Asplenium ceterach Cyclamen hederifolium ssp. Crassifolium Quercus macrolepis Quercus pubescens Polygonum equisetiforme Silybum marianum (If & fr) Verbascum undulatum Vitex agnus-castus
			Mani - Sternbergia fields	Arisarum vulgare Asparagus tenuifolius Biarum tenuifolium (in If) Cheilanthes catanensis Crocus niveus Crocus goulimyi Cyclamen graecum Sternbergia lutea
			Cape Tigani	Colchicum cupanii Crocus goulimyi Euphorbia dendroides Narcissus deficiens (obsoletus)

				Scilla (Prospero) autumnalis ssp. Iatifolia
			Cape Tenaro	Allium callimischon Bellis sylvestris Cheilanthes fragrans Colchicum parlatoris Colchicum psaridis Crocus boryi Cyclamen graecum Dittrichia viscosa Ecbalium elaterium Ephedra foemina Euphorbia dendroides Fritillaria davisii (in fr) Heliotropim europaeum Sarcopoterium spinosum Scilla (Prospero) autumnalis ssp.
6	3 <sup>rd</sup> Nov	Gytheio and West coast of Mani peninsula	Gytheio - Cranae Island	Amaranthus viridis Arisarum vulgare Cercis siliquastrum Crithmum maritimum Crocus boryi Cyclamen graecum (many leaf forms) Limonium vulgare Medicago arborea Portulacca oleracea
			Near Mavrovouni	Cyclamen hederifolium ssp. crassifolium Quercus macrolepis
			Near Chotasia (north of Areopolis)	Crocus boryi Crocus goulimyi Quercus macrolepis Tribulus terrestris
			Aeriopoli (north)	Bellis sylvestris Calamintha nepetoides Carlina corymbosum (in fr) Colchicum cupanii Convolvulus althaeoides Coridothymus capitatus Crocus boryi Crocus goulimyi

				Crocus niveus Cyclamen graecum Cyclamen hederifolium ssp. crassifolium Ecbalium elaterium Euphobia acanthoamnos Glaucium flavum Heliotropium europaeum Iris cretensis Quercus macrolepis Quercus coccifera Sarcopoterium spinosum Scilla (Prospero) autumnalis Smilax aspera (in fr) Spiranthes spiralis Vitex agnus-castus
			Above Gytheio	Colchicum parlatoris Cyclamen graecum Ephedra foemina Spiranthes spiralis
7	4 <sup>th</sup> Nov	Gytheio to Monemvasia	Molai to Sikea	Calendula arvensis Ceratonia siliqua Colchicum cupanii Colchicum sfikasianum Coridothymus (Thymus) capitatus Crocus boryi Crocus goulimyi ssp. leucanthus Cyclamen graecum Cyclamen hederifolium ssp. crassifolium Erica manipuliflora Urginea maritima
8	5 <sup>th</sup> Nov	Monemvasia	Monemvasia (island)	Allium ampeloprasum Calendula arvensis Campanula andrewsii (in fr) Centranthus ruber Colchicum cupanii Crepis sp. Cyclamen graecum Ferula communis (in fr) Glaucium flavum var. fulvum Phlomis fruticosa (in fr) Silybum marianum

	-		Monemvasia environs	Stachys chrysantha (in fr) Stachys spritzenhoferi Sternbergia lutea Tribulus terrestris  Arundo donax
			(SW and Geraki)	Crocus goulimyi ssp. leucanthus Cyclamen hederifolium ssp. Crassifolium Ephedra foemina (in fl.) Erica manipuliflora Limonium graecum Phlomis fruticosus (in fr) Scilla (Prospero) autumnalis
9	6 <sup>th</sup> Nov	Monemvasia to Nafplion	Mycenae	Cyclamen graecum Campanula topaliana
10	7 <sup>th</sup> Nov	Nafplion to Athens airport		Campanala topallalla