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Spring has surely sprung, and the warm days and evenings prove that we have already entered that inevitable careering toward summer's heat. March, April and now May have to be Cyprus' most glorious months: easy temperatures, bright blue skies, flowers everywhere you look and luscious grassy fields. Stalwart residents and visitors are already swimming in the sea! Before we know it, we will be engulfed in the lazy, steamy days of the "high" season.

Here's a question to test just how much attention you pay to the bucolic views surrounding you. What is the most prevalent flower colour in nature? Let's give you a moment or two to think it over... And the answer is: Green! Be honest. Did you know? Grasses in their many varieties, as any hay fever sufferer will tell you, are the most numerous plants on this planet. But because their flowers are relatively inconspicuous, and virtually the same colour as the rest of the plant, grass flowers are usually overlooked entirely. In Cyprus, countrymen have just recently harvested a beautiful commercial grass crop, winter wheat (*Triticum aestivum*), which is grown traditionally on lightly tilled, often small, rough fields where irrigation is limited to the erratic seasonal rainfall.


The first week of May is the finale of the 4<sup>th</sup> European Wild Flower Festival of Cyprus, organised regularly by the unstoppable Mr Sofronis Mantis and the Panarodeio Heritage Centre of Pano Arodes, near Droushia (in the Paphos district). An island-wide celebration of Cyprus' wealth of native floral wonders, the Festival has coordinated more than a dozen guided wild flower walks of cultural discovery since 20 March. To participate in the final activities, or to join the mailing list for future events, contact them on Tel: 26332240 or 99616748, Fax: 26332493 or their web site is: [www.cyprusflora.com](http://www.cyprusflora.com)

So, what is there to see whilst strolling down our hill and seaside paths? Spiny and eye-catching, the caper plant (*Capparis spinosa*) is in bloom from May through till August. Sprouting from stone or cement crevices in walls and walks, the thorns snag clothes and scratch ankles. But the large, pure white flowers, with their many, long and feathery, pinky-purple stamens provide a glamorous contrast to the scraggly, dusty-green sprawling bush. Each flower lasts but a short time, but many flowers open over a long summer season. The earliest sprouts of stem are collected and pickled in vinegar, to serve as one of the many delicious meze dishes in village tavernas. Eaten spines and all, they are a strange culinary choice, but even children find the flavour and experience of eating them "moreish"!

This plant also gives us the well-known Caper, used in many Mediterranean dishes, like traditional Italian Picatta sauce. You may purchase them ready-pickled in glass jars in any supermarket, both here and in most western countries. The small, round, olive-green buds are not seedpods, but flower buds, picked and prepared before they begin to open. The longer seed pods, technically fruits, are also pickled commercially, to a lesser extent, and look like tiny gherkins, with a similar taste. Early-season flower buds are more tender and preferred, and you may notice local residents out in the fields, harvesting them into baskets or sacks. The plant can easily be grown from stem cuttings or mature seed, where plants may briefly frost but not freeze, and prefers drought, intense summer heat and light, and alkaline soil and water.

The real star of the season is the "Queen of Flowers" - the Rose. With its first flowers opening from late March onwards, roses perform particularly well in Cypriot gardens. I have seen them in bloom through the rigors of a cold, salty seaside gale as late as December, and then perk up after a thorough dormant-season pruning to bloom again with gusto the following spring.

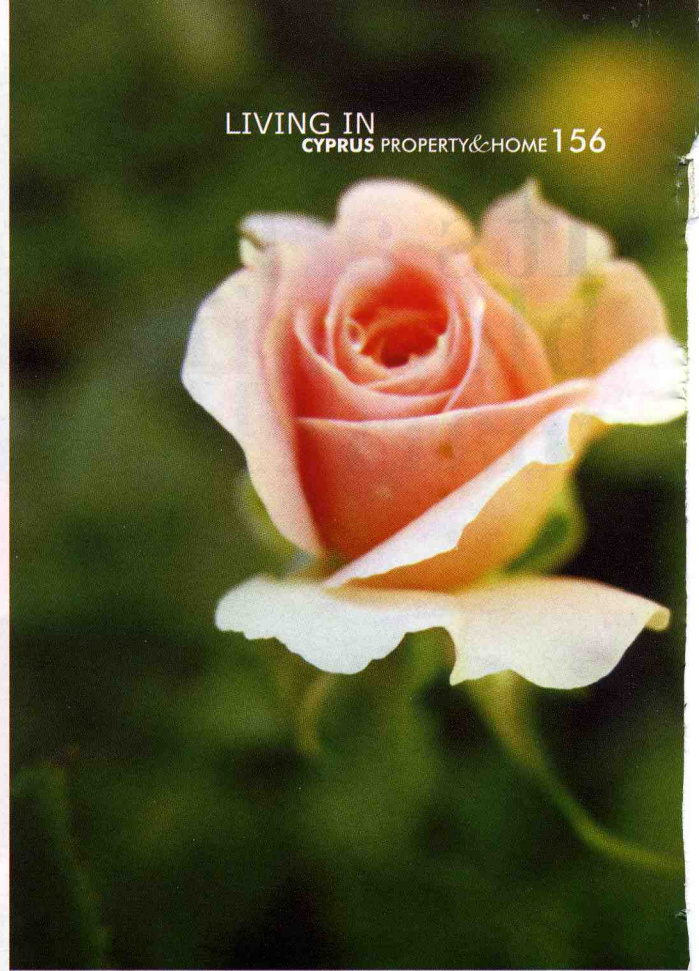
# It's all just bloomin' marvellous!



If garden ants (and the aphids they nurture) are controlled and they are planted in full sun, roses here escape most of the insect pest and fungal problems that trouble the same plants grown in more northerly climes. Any fungal problems may be quickly controlled with a copper or sulphur-based proprietary spray. Insect pests may be sprayed with a mixture of water, vegetable oil, garlic and cayenne pepper, mixed in a blender and strained into a sprayer.

Roses require regular, gentle fertilizer application to produce the best and most numerous blooms on the most robust plants. My nutrient "cocktail" of choice is a mixture of dried fish, blood and bone meal, with granular sulphur, but this is sometimes difficult to find and pricey in Cyprus. Alternately, choose a specially formulated rose food or a standard fertilizer with a higher percentage of phosphorus than nitrogen or potassium, to promote maximum bloom production. Roses produce a web-like surface-root network, so do not cultivate the soil directly under the bush, but do keep the soil evenly moist, so the feeder-roots stay healthy and hydrated. A mulch of broken pottery shards, pebbles, tree bark chunks or other similar products help preserve soil moisture and discourage weed seed germination.

Native to Europe and Asia, as well as parts of North America, the Rosaceae family is possibly the most important group of garden plants. Among its 2000 species - members being the fruits apple, apricot, blackberry, cherry, loquat, peach, pear, plum, raspberry and strawberry. Ornamental Rosaceae include Agrimony, Alchemilla, Goat's Beard (*Aruncus*), Flowering Quince (*Chaenomeles*), Cotoneaster, Hawthorn (*Crataegus*), Quince (*Cydonia*), Filipendula, Geum and many other familiar garden residents.



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In addition to the unending delight they bring to the garden, rose petals may be eaten, as by the Romans, to reduce cholesterol levels, and used to perfume air, body and food. Rosewater, introduced by the Arab physician Avicenna, is used in cooking, primarily in Eastern pastries, and as a skin astringent. In aromatherapy, attar of rose oil is a sedative, antidepressant, and anti-inflammatory remedy. The plants' fruit or "hip" contains high levels of vitamin C, but it is volatile and must be consumed quickly after picking, fresh. The hips are also used to prepare a delicious conserve or jam, but the many small seeds must be strained out.

Whilst touring around Cyprus, be sure to visit the mountain village of Agros, renowned for its production of rosewater, with rose petals from its fields. A visit there promises delights for the eyes, nose and mouth. There is a small family-run factory producing the rosewater and it is possible to watch the whole process, and local shops sell a wide array of rosewaters, perfume oils and pastries. What a lovely way to discover the floral delights of Cyprus!