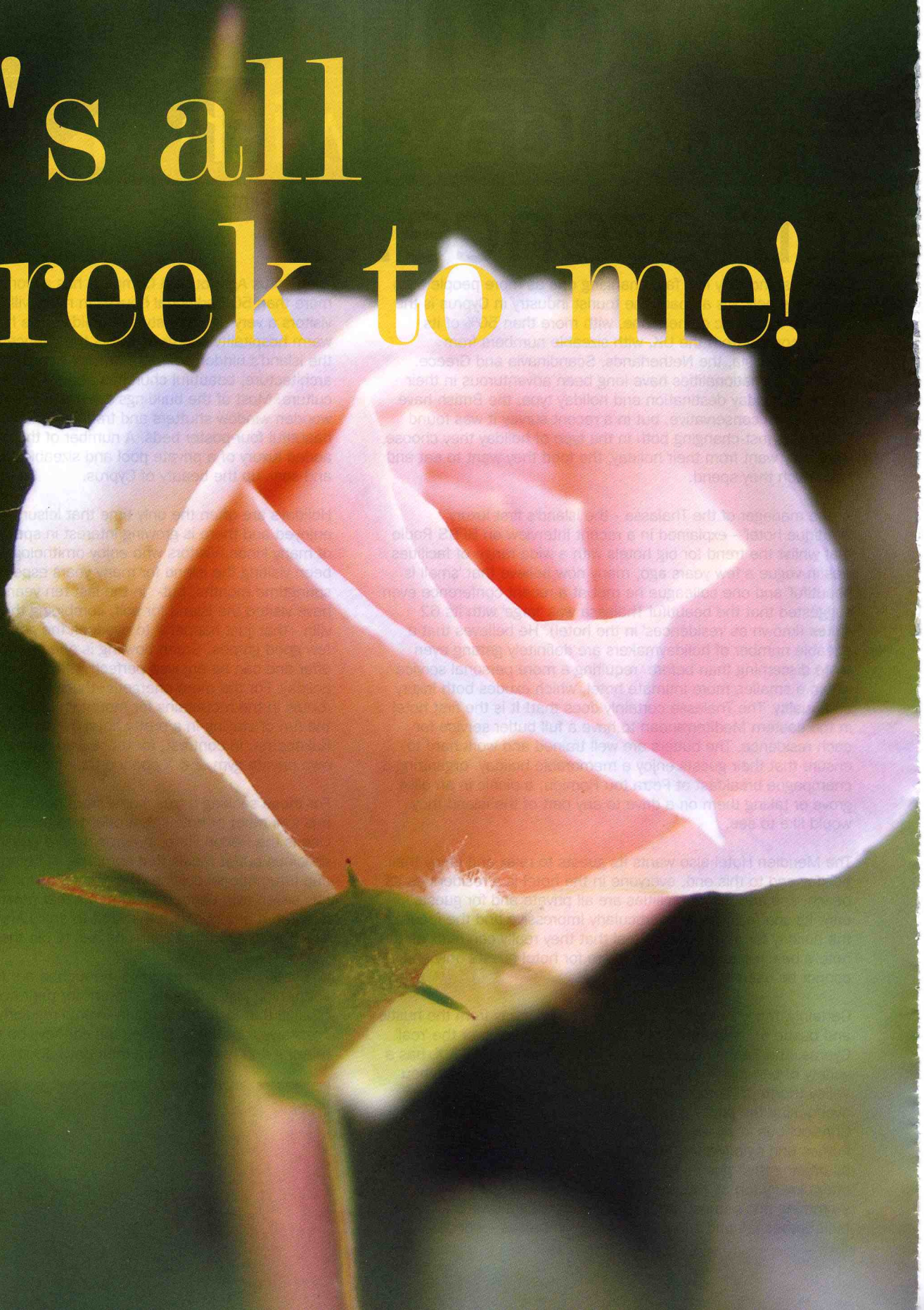


Botany in Cyprus

It's all Greek to me!





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Anyone visiting or moving to a new country will surely gain more from the experience by learning a bit about its culture and language. Ancient Grecian influences are still strongly felt in Cyprus' soil. Visit Paphos' mosaics or the old, inland Greek Orthodox churches, to see how plant-based designs, especially Cyprus' native tulips, are intertwined in both secular and sacred ornament.

Those who have had the hilarious experience of watching the film 'My Big Fat Greek Wedding' will appreciate how much influence the Greek language has had on modern international language development, too. For instance, in the 8th century B.C., Homer and the ancient Greeks used the word 'botanè' meaning 'pasturage for cattle', and which later came to mean 'weed, herb or plant'. This gave rise to the noun 'botanologos', or 'gatherer of herbs' and so emerged the roots of the science of Botany.

Aristotle's student, Theophrastes (372-287B.C.), introduced an intricately observed system of plant classification which long predated the binomial nomenclature of Sweden's Karl Von Linnè, as well as an astonishing knowledge of plant care and uses. Extensive, later elaboration of that work was published by Dioscorides (circa 512A.D.), which still informs modern pharmacopoeias and botanical taxonomy.



Nevertheless, coming back down to earth let sunny spells between rainstorms beckon you for a countryside stroll, to appreciate the enormous variety of wildflowers in bloom during months, which are bleak in most other European countries. Particularly exciting are the drifts of rare and endangered Cyprus orchids. Being so slow to reproduce, they should never be picked or removed from their wild habitat. Look, also, for the small wild blue iris (Eiynandrisis Sisyrinchium) whose dried rhizomes are used in the perfume industry.

An excellent reference to accompany your rambles is 'The Floral Charms of Cyprus', by Valerie Sinclair (ISBN-0-948853-16-6). Or attend one of the many events during the 4th European Wild Flower Festival of Cyprus, from 20 March through 4 May 2005, organized by the Panarodeio Heritage Centre (Tel: 99616748/26332240 or website: www.cyprusflora.com).



In the garden, continue the regular tasks of tidying fallen leaves and control of weeds. If snails and slugs wreak havoc with succulent plant parts, fill glass jars half-full of beer and bury them in the garden soil up to the tops of their necks near shady, snail-hideout areas. The snails will be enticed by the scent and 'drown in their cups'. Alternatively, do a midnight raid of the garden by torchlight to collect enough snails for 'escargot bourguignon'. You'll see Cypriots of all ages out gathering snails from the countryside after early-season rains for a tasty addition to local 'mezes'.

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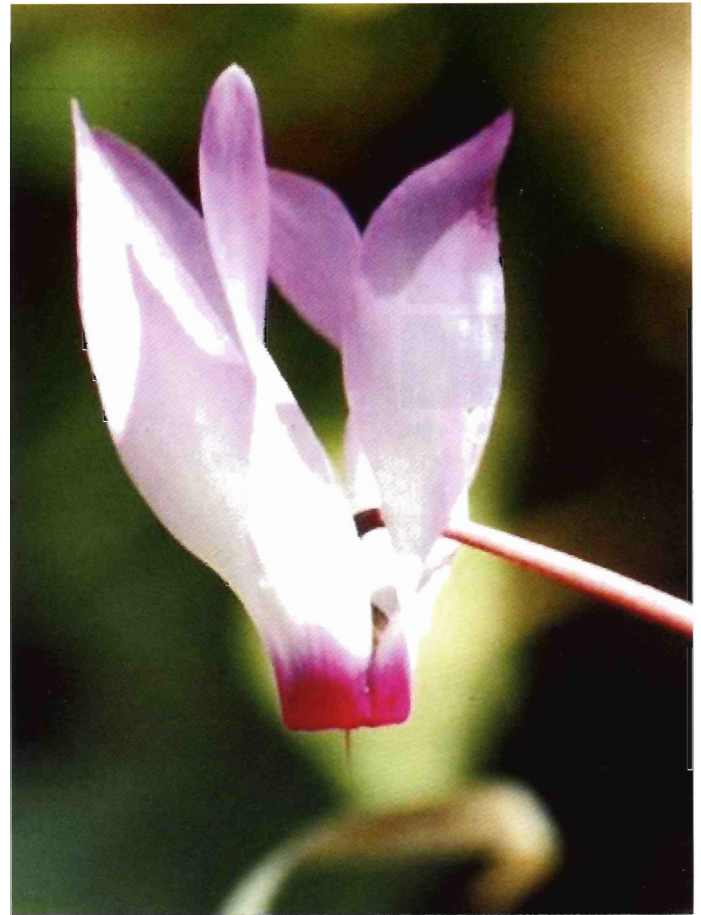
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Sunny spells that send you into the countryside may also draw ants back into your garden, to 'farm' aphids, scale insects, or mealy bug on tender plants tips. Take a few moments to observe the ants and follow their trails back to nest openings. Dust the nest openings with ant powder, available at some supermarkets and all garden centres. Then, with a strong jet of water from a hosepipe, rinse insect pests off garden plants. Repeat the exercise as needed, but large or persistent infestations may respond faster to spraying with a solution of water, cooking oil and a bit of washing up liquid, which will smother the pests. The dead insects may then be washed off the plants with a jet of water, as before.

A small but essential reference to successful gardening in Cyprus is 'The Good Garden Guide' by Barbara Strain and Adam Georgios, printed - locally and available at all good book shops and garden centres. It is concise, compact and full with useful tips gleaned from years of Cyprus gardening experience.

Nearly all trees, shrubs and vines in the garden may be pruned, even heavily, now for shape and size. Always remove weak or crossing branches to create an open and airy form. Then step back and observe your work. Shorten branches as required to create a balanced, pleasing shape and to open view-enhancing keyholes to 'borrow' from the terrain outside your own garden. Use the pruning of your garden to mask a neighbours' utility area but let in a view of their beautiful flowering trees or vines. You may even manage to open a small view of sea or mountains where you previously had none. If more screening is needed, wait for those sunny spells when the ground is not too sodden to plant out trees,



shrubs, vines and annual bedding plant, like the ubiquitous Petunia for a bit more colour, or yellow, winter-flowering jasmine (*Jasminum nudiflorum*, from China). In higher altitudes, wait for planting in spring, after the frosts have passed.

Winters are short in Cyprus, so as we move through February into March, plant seeds of sunflowers and nasturtium directly into the soil for a riot of summer colours. If rains are sparse, be sure to keep citrus and roses evenly watered. Their web of surface roots need even moisture to develop and keep flower buds on the plants. Almond and citrus blossom gives the double benefit of delicious fragrance and a dainty, snowy carpet of petals from spring breezes.

Spring bulbs burst into bloom. Look for crocus, cyclamen, daffodils and many of the South African favourites, like Babiana and exia. When flowers are spent, cut back their stems, so the plants put their energy into leaves and bulbs rather than seed production, to guarantee better blooms the following year.

If you want to get the best from your own Cyprus garden, or if you'd like to recreate a little corner of Cyprus back home, invest in Heidi Gildemeister's duo of books: 'Mediterranean Gardening - A Water wise Approach' (ISBN 84-273-0749-7) and 'Gardening The Mediterranean Way' (ISBN 0-500-511837). Heidi's work is based on 30 years experience creating a landmark Mediterranean garden. She is the past president of the Mediterranean Garden Society, with members around the globe. Contact them by internet at Sparoza, their headquarters and garden outside Athens: www.mediterraneangardensociety.org.

