

"Hang in There - The Heavy Heat of Summer"

August in Cyprus - not even the builders can face it! Construction sites and cement factories close down. Everybody heads for the Troodos Mountain villages or the seaside, searching for shade and a cool breeze. The truly desperate folk go to the UK for some rain and cloud cover.

Our gardens enter a state of suspended animation, with little active growth and precious few flowers. We can count on our native Oleander (*Nerium oleander*), South American Bougainvillea and Geranium, and oriental Hibiscus (*H. rosa-sinensis*) for a flashy, colourful display. Underplant, or fill window boxes, with Vinca in white, pink or purple, providing you have energy left, after keeping the garden adequately watered with deep, infrequent soakings.

This is a good time to take a very early morning walk into the countryside to appreciate the "dawn chorus" of birds, a gorgeous sunrise with a flask of tea or coffee and some of our amazing native plants. When the land seems so parched, there are still **wild flowers in bloom and useful plants to carefully harvest for culinary or medicinal purposes.**

Naturally, wild plant parts must be harvested thoughtfully. Take only a minimum of the part of the plant required, leaving more of the plant than you collect. And never, ever collect protected plants, which are usually rare or endangered. In the case of protected plants, "Take only photographs and keep only memories".

Lemon Balm (*Melissa officinalis*) grows in damp to wet, mainly mountainous areas. Its fragrant leaves, flowers and tender stems are used in salads and to infuse herbal tea. The tea, preferably from fresh leaves, is a tonic for the heart and brain; treating headaches, colds, indigestion, stress and depression. It has antibacterial properties and is a thyroid gland stimulant.

Bramble berry (*Rubus sanctus*) has long been appreciated for its obvious fruit, good mixed with apples in a pie or for jam. The fruit

is rich in vitamins A, B and C, potassium, magnesium, phosphorus and calcium. But Theophrastus and Dioscorides also praised the considerable medicinal properties of the leaves, being infused as a tea to treat diarrhoea and intestinal infections. A poultice from the leaves aids eczema treatment. Tea from the roots is said to help reduce blood pressure. Bramble can be found in slightly shady area in many areas of the island.

Oregano (*Origanum dubium*) grows mainly in forested areas of the island. Feel the stems to help identify the plant. Like all members of the mint family, they are distinctly square. Any cook will recognise the smell of oregano, used widely in recipes throughout the Mediterranean regions. Medicinal and aromatically spicy, the pungent leaves and flowers are gathered to use fresh or dried. As a mild tea it is used against rheumatism, colds and for indigestion.

Sage (*Salvia fruticosa*), another square-stemmed member of the mint family, is widespread, but mainly found in the foothills and mountains. The leaves and blue-purple flowers are traditionally used in omelettes and some other dishes. It is highly regarded locally to prepare a tea against respiratory problems, nervous complaints and depression, indigestion and diabetes. It strengthens the immune system and detoxifies the body. It is also used during menopause to help regulate hot flushes. Sage should never be used during pregnancy or breast feeding; or by those with high blood pressure.

Thyme (*Thymus capitatus*), another well known culinary herb, is a low-growing, woody shrub. Its rounded, cushion-like head helps the plant conserve water in this droughty region. Its tiny, aromatic, grey-green leaves cover stems, which end in terminal clusters of pinkish flowers. It grows in most regions of Cyprus. Egyptians used thyme as an embalming ingredient and in perfumery. Later, Dioscorides recommended its medicinal use. It is still widely used in perfumery, in many international culinary recipes, as an antiseptic and in cough syrups.



Watercress (*Nasturtium officinale*) is from the same family as carrot. Our wild-collected version of the cultivated plant is safe to eat only if cooked, as it can sometimes serve as intermediary host to liver flukes of deer, which can graze the water-side plant. It is occasionally transferred to humans via fresh salad of wild-collected leaves, but cooking renders the parasite harmless. So use your wild fare to make a pot of nutrient-rich soup! The plant contains vitamins A, C and E. It acts as a blood cleanser and general body detoxifier. Short-term use aids treatment of gout, indigestion, heart problems, arthritis, hyperglycaemia and kidney and bladder problems. Watercress has abortive properties and must be avoided during pregnancy.

Purslane (*Portulaca oleracea*), usually considered a garden weed, grows wild in irrigated, cultivated fields. Fresh leaves are a wonderful, spicy and peppery addition to salad. The plant has relaxant (hypertensive) and diuretic properties, both useful against high blood pressure. Eaten fresh or as a fresh-leaf tea, purslane helps relieve head - and stomach-ache, as well as cardiac weakness and urinary tract problems. It is particularly rich in vitamins A and C, iron, calcium and phosphorus.

When the Summer heat abates, as we move into September, **Cyprus enjoys its "second Spring"**. Tidy the garden, water and feed plants; then prepare to enjoy the resurgence of flowering of the more tender garden plants. Renew soil in hanging baskets, then plant out Winter-flowering annuals from small nursery-purchased pots. Seeds for the Winter flower and vegetable gardens may be planted now, in anticipation of early-season rains. The beach still beckons during the hot daylight hours, but humidity is lower and evenings are cooler. This is the most idyllic season, so reap the rewards of your gardening efforts with a few more garden soirees!

Forget the gardening books this season. Visit your local, quality bookshop for a travel adventure story from William Dalrymple, climb into your garden hammock and let your mind float away...

Barbara Davies

