

# Mad as a March Hare? Get Giddy in your Garden!

How could you miss it? Exuberant Spring is bursting out everywhere. This is the loveliest season on Cyprus, with flowers blooming, lush green wild grasses and balmy temperatures. At this time of year, it is evident why Aphrodite and the Ancients chose this as their island of Love and Beauty.



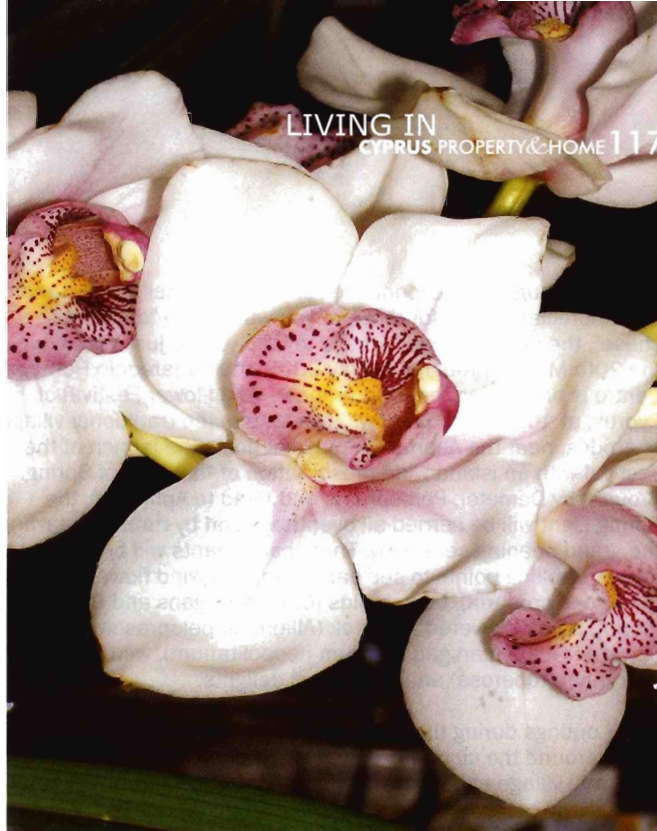
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Drifts of wild red corn poppies (*Papaver rhoeas*), vibrant purple-pink spires of the sword lily (*Gladiolus italicus*) and golden yellow daisies, (*Chrysanthemum coronarium*) paint a neon kaleidoscope over wasteland, cultivated fields and roadside swaths. The island's early blooming sweet almonds (*Prunus dulcis*) have already scattered their delicate pinkie-white petals to the breezes.

Let yourself be drawn into the fields and hills to more intimately discover hundreds of subtle but beautiful wild plants. Many are found growing nowhere else on our earth. Independent walkers may explore all the nooks and crannies of the island. However, remember to respect private property, leave wild flowers and plants as they are found and take all rubbish home. Be a good houseguest when you visit Mother Nature!

In earlier, less affluent times, local people depended on wild-collected plants for tasty additions to the kitchen and useful aids to the medicine cabinet. Some of the favourites are in bloom this month and you will see them as you stroll out into the countryside.

Cushion-like sub shrubs of thyme (both *Thymus capitatus* and *T. integer*) bear tiny pink or purple flowers. The grey-green foliage of these plants contains volatile oils widely used since ancient times. Egyptians employed thyme oil for embalming their famous mummies, and as a perfume and incense ingredient.



Thymol is the antiseptic phenol responsible for both the aroma and the oil's medicinal qualities. The early Greek writer, Dioscorides, championed its use. It is a particularly effective antifungal treatment, as well as being a potent vermifuge and expectorant. So reach for the thyme oil to get rid of athlete's foot, pinworms, or that annoying, lingering cough! Recent Scottish trials have shown thyme oil to be a powerful antioxidant, helping to counter the effects of aging and maintain high levels of essential fatty acids within the brain. There are other well-documented uses for thymol in treating asthma, stomach ulcers and thrush. Not bad for a scrappy little bush!

One of the most widely used fragrant herbs is our native lavender (*Lavandula stoechas*), with its grey-green, prickly leaves and corolla-tubular purple flowers. This is the flower, which traditionally decorates the Good Friday processional Epitaph. Its Greek name, "Myrophores", is for the women at Christ's tomb, who brought perfumes to dress the body. The parts, which make up the word, are "myron", or perfume/aroma, and "phero", or bring/carry. Medicinally, the plant is rich in aromatic volatile oils (including linalyl acetate, cineole, nerol, borneol and others), flavonoids, tannins and coumarins. As an excellent insecticide, the dried flowers may be used to scent clothes and repel moth larvae from woollens, and the oil may be applied to the skin with citronella to repel mosquitoes and midges.

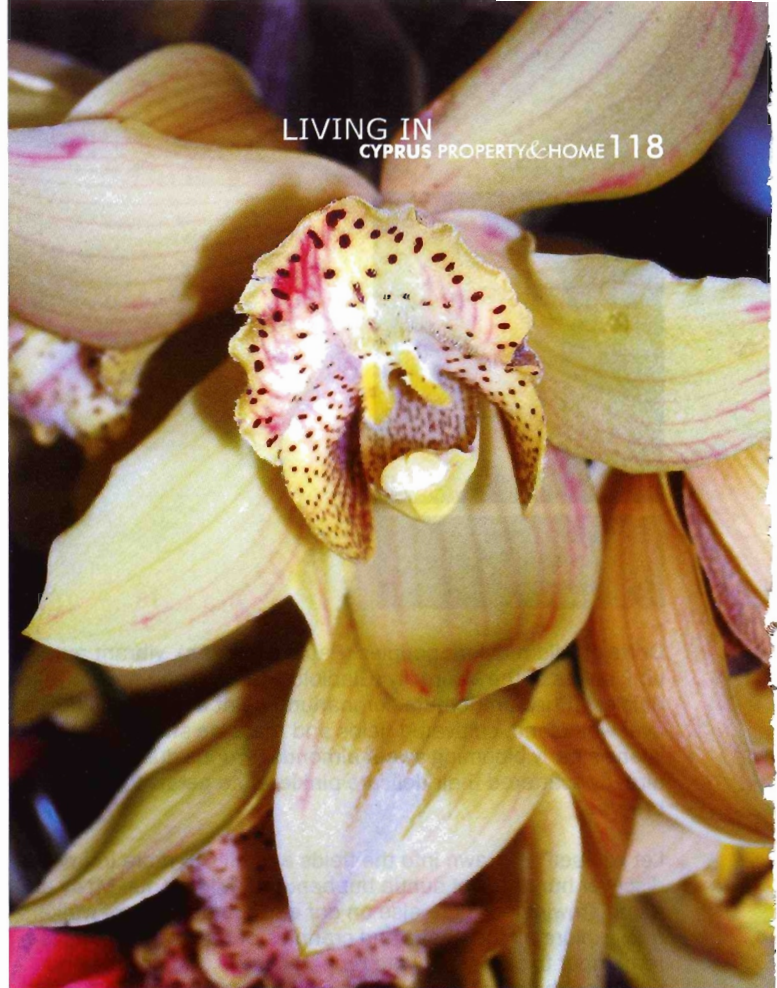
Research shows that the neat oil is as good as aloe vera gel for the treatment of first degree burns, and is effective as an antiseptic and antibacterial topical treatment. It is exceedingly calming to the nervous system. Sniffing the aroma at bedtime helps calm the nerves for any easier transition to sleep, and is part of any headache sufferer's self-help kit. Because of this antidote to nervousness, lavender oil aroma may also be inhaled to relax spasm associated with asthma and colic.

Even the annual weeds, which we might more readily pull and consign to the compost pile, have their place in the countryside, if not in the garden. One of the most ubiquitous and taken for granted is the smooth sow thistle (*Sonchus oleraceus*), a yellow-flowered weed in bloom on and off throughout the year. The common Greek name for this plant is "galactochorto", or milk weed because of its viscous, milky sap. Its tender stems were extensively used as a boiled or steamed vegetable, sometimes sautéed with olive oil and onion, or mixed into scrambled eggs. Medicinally, it is considered a calmate and tranquilizer, but was sometimes employed in larger amounts as a laxative.

A guide through life's experiences can give a richer understanding and appreciation. So, for those of you who like to "cut to the chase", the perfect guide is ready to help you do just that. From the 20th March through 4th May 2005, the Panarodeio Heritage Centre is presenting the 4th European Wild Flower Festival of Cyprus, at 10:30a.m., Sunday, 20th March, the traditional village of Arodes, near the Akamas Peninsula, hosts the launch of the Festival with an island-wide presentation of the Light of Spring. Brought by Demeter, Persephone and Pluto to Aphrodite, the Spring-Light will be carried all over the island by runners, starting the grand opening ceremony. Then, participants will be bussed to nearby strolling points to see early-blooming wind flowers (Anemone cornaria), bee orchids (Ophrys elegans and Orchis morio), purple-flowered wild leek (Allium ampeloprasum), white-flowered Neapolitan garlic (Allium neapolitanum), wild geranium (Geranium tuberosa) and other local delights.

Other outings during the Festival will introduce plants that find a home around the city walls of Nicosia, in the native tulip fields of Stroumbi village and an intercommunal visit to Morphou (Myrtou). Particularly exciting will be the annual stroll through the wild orchid and fennel fields near Kathikas village. More information is available at Cyprus Tourism offices, hotel information desks and directly from the organizer. To contact the Panarodeio Heritage Centre, phone 26332240 or 99616748, fax to 26332493 or go to them via the web at [www.cyprusflora.com](http://www.cyprusflora.com)

Back in the home garden, this is the very last moment to do your heavy pruning of trees, shrubs and vines, which will be leafing out now. It is good to see life returning visibly to the garden after February's bone-chilling, night time temperatures. Fill in any bare spots with blooming annuals, especially the dependable Petunia, native to South America and related to the tobacco plant. Petunias, despite their common reputation, are just so adaptable. They will compete with tree roots, drought and shade, and still keep blooming their little hearts out. So, give them plenty of use, especially since they are available in nearly every colour of the rainbow, except orange and true blue. They will thrive in hanging baskets, planters and even directly into the garden soil. But beware! Their leaves can have a similar narcotic effect to tobacco, and some other members of the nightshade family (Solanacea-tomato, potato, eggplant, datura and jimson weed, etc.). Wear gardening gloves when handling the plants, to protect sensitive skin from possible inflammation.



Continue to keep weeds under control, and bait for snails if you see hordes of them eating your shade garden into oblivion. Use copper-based snail baits, rather than methaldehyde, to stop putting excess chemical toxins into the soil and, hence, into our water supply. Begin dusting or spraying grape vines with sulphur-based products to keep fungus, like powdery mildew, under control. Scrupulously follow label instructions for proportions, and do wear protective gear, to keep chemicals out of mucous membranes and off skin, where they can be absorbed into the body.

Anyone who enjoys digging deeper into the lore surrounding wild and garden plants would do well to invest in a copy of the Encyclopedia of Medicinal Plants, by master medical herbalist, Andrew Chevallier, FNIMH and senior lecturer at Middlesex University (ISBN 0 7513 1209 6). Remembering that the gifts of the garden to our sense of well being and health have been with us as long a Man has been roaming the planet, think about these words of wisdom from Plato: "Wherever there is a place full of flowers, a beautiful garden with an aroma, love goes and only there it stays." Happy gardening!

