

Gardens in the Sun the Greek Way!

ISSUE 10

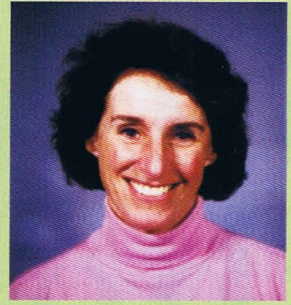
There is something stern and magnificent about the stone that characterises much of the Greek landscape. It sets the scene for experiences, which are deep and potent. The land is suffused with an ancient life force, and the stones are sentinels.

Indeed, to explore the wild nature of the Greek landscape more intimately is to discover its unique, living links to prehistory. The Aegean island groups (Cyclades, Dodecanese, Sporades and Lesvos/Limnos) gave a relatively mild refuge to many creatures and plants during the last ice age. Descendants of those amazing refugees are found now only on these tiny outposts.

In Chalkidiki, archaeologists have found and identified human remains which some have dated to be 700,000 years old. Man's impact on the Greek landscape goes back a very long way, indeed!

Although the total Greek landmass is relatively small, it is widespread, due to its island character. The landscape, and how we integrate our gardens into it, is influenced by a wide range of microclimates, linked together by the many Mediterranean characteristics they all share. Their strongest link is the Mediterranean Sea itself, which tempers all but the deep, inland or high mountain weather patterns.

There are other parts of our planet sharing some of the same attributes: California, Chile, South Africa and Australia. These regions give us some very adaptable, colourful garden 'imports', like Bougainvillea, African Daisy (*Arcotis acaulis*), Nasturtium (*Tropaeolum majus*) or Cape Honeysuckle (*Tecomaria capensis*). But the Mediterranean region sets the benchmark, with its prolonged heat and natural drought. Relief comes with varying amounts of winter-only rain, accompanied by comparatively mild winter temperatures.



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Plants best adapted to these agreeable holiday conditions, which challenge a typical European garden's survival, have deep tap-roots or sometimes wide-branching root systems. These increase surface area for absorbing scarce soil moisture. Their leaves, or even stems are often grey-blue in colour tone, and clothed in bristles or hairs. The hairs trap moisture from the air, to be absorbed by leaves, or directed as microscopic 'trickles' down stems to soil surface.

Success or failure in your Greek garden will depend upon how you adapt your thinking to natural conditions. Will you fight like a salmon chasing upstream or go with the flow? Choose plants according to your region's average winter rainfall. In Corfu, which could almost be considered lush, you may grow hydrangea (*Hydrangea macrophylla* or *H. quercifolia*) in select, north-facing locations. But on Crete, the driest of our microclimates, your greatest garden glory will come from working with the most drought-tolerant Mediterranean native plants, like oleander (*Nerium oleander*) and rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*), among hundreds of other choices, especially for south-facing exposures.

As you plan your new garden, or modify your old one, be observant. Look at gardens near yours, which are particularly attractive. Notice if there is a water-guzzling irrigation system in use, or if the plants are left to depend only on nature's contribution. Make your own shopping list of those plants, which grow well with little or no supplemental irrigation. You'll have lower water bills from your environmentally conscious choices.



Spend time looking at your 'work-in-progress'. Note from which direction cold winter storms or desiccating summer winds arrive. That is the side of the garden for protective barrier plantings, to guard against salt-or grit-bearing blasts, which burn leaves and rob them of precious moisture.

Give thought to 'view-corridors'. With careful placement of hedges, trees and tall shrubs, you can gain shelter and privacy, while retaining the view for which you may have paid dearly. 'Borrow' a neighbour's shapely treetop or a distant mountain by planting to frame them for your own viewing pleasure.

Locate the right plant in the right place the first time. To make the best choices on your own, look to others' hard-won experience. You can't do better than to invest in two books by Heidi Gildemeister. For more than 20 years, she has been coaxing natural miracles out of the Mediterranean soil of her own 10-acre garden. 'Mediterranean Gardening: A Waterwise Approach' (ISBN 84-273-0749-7) and 'Gardening the Mediterranean Way: Practical Solutions for Summer-Dry Climates' (ISBN 0-500-51183-7) are indispensable guides to gardening success in Greece.

