

whispers of the land...

Sacred Seeds and Aphrodite's Trail

'Sweet-smelling land' is how Homer describes Cyprus and everything at Le Meridien conspires to keep you radiantly aware of this intoxicating power of the land. An open-air 'parfumerie' that keeps butterflies and bees delightfully busy adding to the charm of colours and the wonderful whispers of the water as it flows from various parts of the gardens. Planted with love and devotion by tender hands and people who know their language this mystic friendship with the plants develops into a relationship that outlives the strict life-boundaries of most seasonal plants creating happy meetings with new bio-communities, across seasons, at the secret delight of all who know gardening well.

The vital oxygen we inhale today was gently exhaled in the dark of night by growing plants. The life-sustaining water we drink once accumulated as vapour, then rained down to cover most of our earth, giving a home to fish and other life in our seas. We are thus forever intimately linked to the rhythms of Mother Nature.

Our ancestors' earliest struggles to wrest meaning from life inevitably focused on natural phenomena. Flowers, seed and other plant parts, along with milk and other organic substances, were offered in hopes of receiving help and favour from unseen forces. Cyprus' historic Greek cultural roots left a deep and lasting imprint on every aspect of island life, weaving magic and practicality through the plants associated with our Classical gods and goddesses.

One of the most delightful ways to discover the many layers of Cyprus through the eyes of the Ancients is to follow the trail of Aphrodite. The goddess of love, beauty, fertility and childbirth is quintessentially Cypriot, appearing in Homer's 8 B.C. writings. Spawned by Zeus' misfortune in a love affair, born naked and fully grown from sea foam, she was blown ashore at Petra tou Romiou (Aphrodite's Rock) by the Zephyrs and guided inland, shielded with myrtle branches, by her handmaidens.

Myrtle (*Myrtus communis*) bears an ancient Greek botanical name and was the best known plant in Antiquity,



used extensively to decorate temples and sanctuaries, and certainly it was used to adorn Aphrodite's famous temple at Kouklia. An annual procession from today's Pafos wended its way through Yeroskipou (which translates as "Sacred Garden") and on to the four-day Aphrodisia festival.

Associated with both love and death, graves were strewn with myrtle, and it was burned, mixed with mint and rosemary for funeral rites. Fragrant myrtle, myrsine in Greek, was worn in wreaths by initiates into the religious mysteries at Eleusis, near Athens. In bridal wreaths it was linked to Aphrodite as a symbol of beauty and chastity.

Its distinctive aromatic properties made myrtle branches useful as a floor-strewing plant, and furniture was scoured with its antiseptic juices. Myrtle water is called eau d'ange,

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or angel's water, and used in perfumery. Its astringent qualities make it a beneficial treatment for bruises, blemishes and haemorrhoids. The leaf oil contains myrtol, effective against gingivitis and bad breath. As prescribed by Dioscorides, the renowned 1st century doctor, the oil may be rubbed onto the chest to treat coughs and congestion. The berries were favoured by Athenians as a confection, and lend a unique flavour when added to stewed or roasted beef or pheasant. The star-like, creamy white flowers of this 5 meter (16.5 ft.) evergreen tree or shrub impart an orange-blossom scent to sweet dishes.

The love lives of the Classical Greek gods and goddesses were often convoluted affairs, particularly so for light-hearted Aphrodite. Aphrodite was romantically linked with the first ruler-king of Cyprus, Kinyras, and with Adonis. Perhaps it was out in the wild Akamas peninsula, somewhere near the Baths of Aphrodite, not far from Fontana Amorosa, that Adonis was gored to death by a boar. For every tear shed by Aphrodite at her lover's death, a white rose sprang up. And for every drop of blood shed by Adonis, there came a red rose. This is the origin in myth of both Rosa canina, the dog rose, and Rosa damascene, the damask rose.

While the oldest known depiction of a rose is in the Bronze Age Blue Bird fresco of the Palace of Knossos on Crete, the first rose preceded the first man. A fossil imprint of a rose-leaf sprig found in Colorado is thought to be about 40 million years old! Though now dramatically changed, the ancient Mediterranean region was probably ablaze with rose blossoms, giving its name to Rhodes (Rhodos), which imprinted its coinage with the flower from Archaic times. Roses have been effectively used for salves, ointments, tinctures, oils and floral waters, treating maladies of skin, eyes gums and intestines, and speeds wound healing. Associated with love, femininity and rejuvenation, it is a key perfume and cosmetic ingredient. Rose water flavours Cyprus Delight from Yeroskipou or Lefkara villages, and rose petals enhance jam, or syrup to mix with milk as a child's drink.

Remember Plato's admonition, "Love will not settle on body or soul or aught else that is flowerless or whose flower has faded away", and let Aphrodite's sweet breath of love flow over you during your days on Cyprus. ■