

Gardens

The Greek garden that is a tale of modern regeneration

Mount Hymettus is a model for donors who want to restore a landscape after the ravages of war

Robin Lane Fox



Philodassiki Botanical Garden near Athens © Philodassiki Botanical Garden

50 MINUTES AGO by: **Robin Lane Fox**

One of the world's most famous types of honey comes from Mount Hymettus, scarcely three miles from the centre of busy Athens. Myths and poets celebrated it for almost 1,000 years, but nowadays outsiders might regard it as a fictional mirage. Modern Athens has been notorious for polluted air and urban overcrowding. In antiquity bees were said to have brought honey from Hymettus to the lips of the young Plato. Nowadays, they would struggle to find their way to the philosopher's Academy across multitrack highways and the concrete campus of the university at the foot of its hill. Ancient Timon, that hater of mankind, is said to have withdrawn to a cave on Hymettus in disgust at his fellow citizens. He had lavished his personal fortune on them all and had had a donor's ultimate nightmare, not a word of thanks. The idea that anyone would then spend a modern fortune on Hymettus itself would strike Timon as preposterous.

In fact, Mount Hymettus is a remarkable tale of modern regeneration and replanting, powered by private donations. On its slopes there is even a botanical garden, my recent destination with members of the Mediterranean Garden Society, a worldwide group

which I recommend to readers who have a garden in the Med's dry climate and wish to grow plants that are not just a desperate echo of Britain but are at home in local conditions (for details of membership see mediterraneangardensociety.org (<http://mediterraneangardensociety.org/>)). On Hymettus the Philodassiki Botanical Garden makes valiant use of a dry slope on the mountainside and shows hundreds of plants native to Greece and the Aegean Islands. As I climbed along its well-planned paths, I saw silver- and grey-leaved plants to which I could not even put a first Latin name. I reasserted my ignorance in front of Greek types of localised oaks and junipers which I mistook for peculiar types of cedar or alders with shiny leaves.

In 1945, at the end of the war, Hymettus's slopes had been devastated by fighting and by the Athenians' desperate stripping of its woods, one of their only accessible sources of fuel. The mountain became an ecological wreck. A Union of Friends of the Forest was formed to address the catastrophe and contrived to plant about 3m trees over the following three decades, many of which were raised in a nursery dedicated to their supply. At the centre of the plan lay the 11th-century monastery of Kaisariani on a site of pre-Christian myth and cult. Under the direction of Kaity Argyropoulou and others, Hymettus regained a canopy of trees, shrubs and aromatic plants which brought back bees and enabled its honey to return to life.



Crocus niveus © Philodassiki Botanical Garden

The replanting was underpinned by a gift from the Melas family of their personal business fortune, received in a way which Timon would have envied. In the past 60 years it has enabled a green forest to be re-established and the botanic garden at its centre to be planted and maintained. Between 1997 and 1999, a staff of five were deployed to lay out proper paths through the slopes, to replant the botanic areas and to install an

essential watering system, fed from tanks for rainwater on the site. At a cost of €170,000 the site was upgraded and now, in these years of crisis, an annual budget of €30,000 sustains a skeletal staff: a full-time gardener, the expert Nikos Pangas, with a part-time curator, Sophia Pilavachi, and a part-time systematic botanist. Volunteers come to help at a site which they love and admire. The garden also runs a small plant nursery with conspicuously well-grown stock in polythene pots. As a charity, it cannot sell these plants, but it opens on Saturday mornings and gives customers their pick of the stock in the hope of donations towards the garden's upkeep. More customers make a gift than not.

The rainfall on the mountain is minimal and tree roots and shrubs compete for water. The conditions are testingly Greek and so the approach has been to give Greek plants pride of place. The result is a garden without a single daisy-flowered intruder from South Africa. Instead the beds are homes for Greek peonies, Greek thymes, Greek marjorams, Greek germanders and a whole range of grey-leaved Greek survivors which are unknown to Britain's RHS Plant Finder.



Sternbergia lutea © Philodassiki Botanical Garden

Greek flora is amazingly varied and far more diverse than is ever remarked by the great classical Greek poets of the past. They never even mention the superb wild tulips, let alone the beautifully marbled leaves on wild Greek cyclamen. They were no help to me as I encountered the strikingly grey-leaved *Inula candida*, the whiter than white-leaved *Salvia candidissima*, the silvery *Asperula taygetea* from the mountains of ancient Sparta and the Attic *Thymus parnassicus*, one of the local magnets for bees. Labels marked good clumps of the lovely Greek peony from Rhodes, which now flowers yearly in the garden. Other labels taught me that the excellent single red-flowered *Paeonia peregrina* of our

gardens is a native, with a far deeper colour, of Epirus in the north-west corner of Greece. I had just been delightedly baffled by the small evergreen leaves and yellowish undersides of an oak from Cyprus called *Quercus alnifolia* when I slid down the hillside to the sight which will cap even this year's enchanted autumn in my mind.



Tulipa saxatilis © Philodassiki Botanical Garden



Crocus pallasii © Alan Hawes

Between tree roots, steps and labels, some flowering clumps of yellow *Sternbergia* were as ever a delight. This yellow flower of autumn is an essential bulb in English gardens,

but near Athens it is an ultra-special sight. In Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus*, that wondrous play about implacable heroism and old age which the master tragedian wrote in his eighties, the chorus, men from the Attic countryside, praise their land for its "gold-gleaming crocus", not the crocuses, experts now believe, of our spring gardens but the golden crocus-like sternbergias of autumn, flowers of low altitudes which were glowing round my feet. Beyond them, true crocuses were gleaming in an unSophoclean way, not gold ones but lilac ones whose flowers were zoned with yellow and white, none other than *Crocus pallasii* whose name recalls the goddess Pallas Athena and which refuses to grow in English gardens because of the cool summers and winter damp. Small drifts of Pallas's crocus paid floral tribute to their goddess within three miles of her Athenian acropolis. With the Sophoclean golden crocus they are the sight which will sustain me through England's unGreek winter.

Private gifts and dedicated work have made this garden possible. During the years of postwar urban sprawl, not everything in Athens has been heading for catastrophe. Hymettus is a model for givers who want to restore a landscape when the ravages of war recede.

Photographs: Philodassiki Botanical Garden; Alan Hawes

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