

Malta – scrubland or botanical paradise

Penelope S Hellyer

To the casual eye, much of the Maltese landscape looks rugged, untidy and unkempt, with broken gates and wooden fences bleached by the sun, rubble-filled fields grazed by goats and sheep, and weeds growing in great abundance (fig 1). But to the keen plantsman it is a haven of delight where both native and alien plants abound. Lean closer and examine the rocky terrain centimetre by centimetre; be prepared to kneel, or lie on your belly. Botanical gems are to be found, snuggled against rocks or bursting from the rock's cavities. Then you will not be surprised that Malta has often been called a botanical paradise.

The introduction to *The Maltese Countryside* by Guido Bonnett and Joe Attard defines the rich variety of the island's ecosystems, each with its typical vegetation. The biotopes fall into many different categories: 'woodland, maquis, garrigue, steppe, clay slopes, valley beds, valley sides, watercourses, saline marshland, cliff tops, cliff faces, and sand dunes'. Then of course there is disturbed ground, in both urban and rural settings, including roadsides, stonewalls and fallow fields.



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Fig. 1 The landscape can appear rugged, untidy and unkempt



Fig. 2 Dingli Cliffs

Malta is host to approximately 1000 different species; 200 are considered to be aliens, introduced for either agricultural or ornamental purposes, while the other 800 are indigenous or native. Many millennia ago, Malta was attached by a land bridge to Sicily (and Europe) and to North Africa, so much of its flora has similarities to the Mediterranean region. With 20 endemic species and sub-species found only here,

Fig. 3 *Agave americana*Fig. 4 *Ferula communis*

Bonnett and Attard voiced their concerns about protecting the flora of Malta, recognising the huge responsibility of the Maltese people to ‘safeguard this international heritage’.

This is not what first drew me to Dingli Cliffs, but I have returned several times since.

It is the place I have studied most closely, and where most of these photographs were taken. The name is rather misleading, for the cliff face



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Fig. 5 *Asphodelus aestivus*

Fig. 6 *Cynara cardunculus*

lies some way off from the area known as Dingli Cliffs (fig. 2), and is best viewed from the sea. The cliffs are themselves fascinating, both for their structure and for the many plants growing on, or in, them.

The road to Dingli is dusty and rutted, more from neglect than the numbers of cars and buses that travel along it. The flat rocky ground makes walking difficult, so sensible shoes are recommended. This plateau drops steeply down to a flat strip of land that is farmed extensively, its rich red soil divided by low, dry limestone walls or ribbons of wild flowers. The Dingli cliff face then falls sharply to the sea. The village of Had Dingli



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Fig. 7 *Ancampsis pyramidalis*, the Pyramidal Orchid

Fig. 8 *Orchis conica*, the Milky Orchid

is some half a mile from this area; though it's described as a coastal village, its main trade is farming, not fishing, as it has no direct contact with the water.

The two sentinels dominating the landscape of Malta are *Agave americana* (fig. 3) and *Ferula communis* (fig. 4). The *Agave*, by far the most imposing, grows elsewhere on the island and makes an almost surreal picture on the arid soil in which it thrives. In summer the spreading panicles of yellowish-green flowers thrust skywards from the basal rosettes. New baby offsets surround the central rosette, which will die once it has flowered. *Ferula communis* is just as impressive on the craggy top of Dingli Cliff, showing robust growth in an exposed position on this inhospitable ground. After several years' growth, multi-forked stems carry many-branched umbels of yellow flowers in early and mid summer, and the feathery foliage is a foil for the rock on which it grows.

Asphodelus aestivus (fig. 5) spreads far more extensively in this area. One reason given is that it is unpalatable to livestock. It thrives in the rocky soil, pushing from crevices where no earth is visible, and appears content wherever it is. All the star-shaped flowers that I saw were well-marked with a deep-pinky-red central vein, while the buds and the flowers are flushed pink. It is host to the Longhorn Beetle, *Agapanthia asphodeli*, which can be seen only in late March and early April when it's perched on the stem of the plant. Diminutive *Anagallis arvensis* nestles on the ground, the bright blue welcome amongst the detritus of the earlier season. Numerous species of thistle flourish in Malta; the commonest, the boar thistle, *Galactites tomentosa*, has beautifully marked foliage, the wide white main veins a sharp contrast on the mid-green leaves. The cardoon or wild artichoke, *Cynara cardunculus* (fig. 6), grows on various terrains including steppe, garrigue and clay slopes, and its statuesque stems can reach 0.9m in height. Numerous beetles and other insects visit its open flowerheads.

Of the many orchids that can be found on Malta I have come across two. The Common Pyramidal Orchid (fig. 7), *Ancamptis pyramidalis*, has flowers which are

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Fig. 9 *Euphorbia melitensis*

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Fig. 10 *Euphorbia pinea*

extremely variable in colour, from palest pink to purple. My specimen, although poorly shaped, survived in a pocket of soil in the weathered limestone. The Milky Orchid (fig. 8), *Orchis conica*, is equally inconstant in both its colour and the patterns on its petals. I found several plants on the open plateau, nestled closely to the small rocks.

Several species of *Euphorbia* are listed. The endemic species, *Euphorbia melitensis* (fig. 9), has handsome stems with a reddish hue and can grow into a dense shrub up to 75cm in height, in favourable sites washing over the rocks where it can become the dominant species. It is now protected under Maltese law. Its yellow flowers are seen only in spring, while *Euphorbia pinea* (fig. 10) blooms all year round, the yellow flowers held above usually reddish stems, similar to the lower leaves in colour.

Arisarum vulgare (fig. 11) was an exciting find for, despite the guidance given by Bonnett and Attard that the 'Friar's Cowl is found in disturbed ground and damp valleys and usually found growing in groups', the solitary specimen I came across was tucked against the shadier side of a rock, with a pale, starved leaf, which would in a better habitat be a deep rich green.

On this stony land I came across several plants which, when later identified, I came to realise would have grown to their full glory in their preferred habitat. Indeed it proved impossible to identify some plants with absolute certainty, so it would be helpful if you're able to confirm or challenge the names of the plants shown here. *Erica multiflora* was one, a single flower stem with dead and decaying twiggy bits filling the tiny pocket in which it grew. *Lobularia maritima*, Sweet Alyssum or Sweet Alison (fig. 12), thrived in a straggly, untidy manner stretching across other small plants and rocks, many covered with the Wall Xanthoria, *Xanthoria sp.*, ranging from orange to a greenish colour. Looking closely at the photograph of *Lobularia*, you can see that the flowerheads, with



Fig. 11 *Arisarum vulgare*

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Fig. 12 *Lobularia maritima*

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Fig. 13 *Capparis orientalis*



Fig. 14 *Nauplius aquaticus*, the Seaside Ox-eye Daisy

buds still to come, also have spent, transparent seedpods.

Even in this very arid environment, shrubby plants survive too. *Lonicera implexa*, *Hypericum aegypticum* and *Capparis orientalis*, a caper bush (fig. 13), are a delight. The caper has dramatic flowers which several beetles and insects enjoy. It's as if it's making a plea to allow the buds to remain, instead of being taken and pickled in vinegar.

Yellow-flowered plants dominate much of the landscape in winter, spring and summer. The Crown Daisy, *Chrysanthemum coronarium*, is almost like a weed, with its 60cm stems prominent in the verges and disturbed ground. *Nauplius aquaticus* (fig. 14), the Seaside Ox-eye Daisy, grows in rocky and sandy coastal areas and can form large mats. *Lotus cytisoides* will form a small shrub up to 45cm. Cape Sorrel, *Oxalis pes-caprae*, and the Smooth Sow-thistle, *Sonchus oleraceus*, are widespread.

Many plants are fond reminders of home: common fennel, several sedums, silenes, and borage, which grow in profusion.

Malta offers much to people with a wide range of interests and, if you are in any way interested in plants, there is a rich selection to see, admire and learn about. I have visited the Dingli area in February, March and May – when I realised from the seed pods on many plants that I had missed a flash of beauty. If I were able, I would visit once a month, just to examine more closely the Cliffs habitat.

To paraphrase Hans Christian Webber in *Wild Plants of Malta*, if you are tempted to enjoy Dingli Cliff or one of the extensive walks through this beautiful countryside, 'leave only footprints on paths and take only pictures' of this botanical paradise. 🌿

Penelope Hellyer ran a small specialist nursery from her garden at Orchards, Rowfant, Sussex, opening the garden – originally planted by Arthur Hellyer and his wife Gay – for charity, until she retired to Italy in 2005. Her memoir about the garden at Orchards, *The Haphazard Gardener*, was published in 2012. Follow Penelope on Twitter @penelopehellyer. <http://penelope.hellyer@blogspot.com> & www.facebook.com/TheHaphazardGardener.