

International Rock Gardener

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This second issue into our seventeenth year of the IRG (International Rock Gardener) e- magazine – published free, each month, on the website www.srgc.net of the Scottish Rock Garden Club – is dedicated to an article on a favourite genus of the acclaimed plantsman, Robert Rolfe. While violas are one of his favoured genera, Robert has had considerable success showing many of the other plants he grows as well as travelling widely to study them in nature. Two of Robert's show plants, photos ex SRGC Forum:



Allium shelkovnikovii 'Sarejn' and *Rhododendron racemosum*, a plant that came to be shown via the train and by taxi.

Robert is also an author, of course, with titles such as *The Alpine House: its Plants and Purposes and Portraits of Alpine Plants*. He is a co-author of *Colchicum: The Complete Guide*, by Christopher Grey-Wilson, Rod Leeds and Robert Rolfe.



From RHS Chelsea: some members of the Joint Rock Committee discussing plants on the Kevock stand. From left Martin Sheader, Ian Bainbridge, Chris Grey-Wilson, Robert Rolfe, Peter Semple, Ian Christie (just visible behind), Joy Bishop, Carol Bainbridge, Michael Pitcher (RHS, Committee). Secretary), Tony Hall and Bill Baker with his back to camera.

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--- Violas in the Mountains ---

Viola alpina and V. poetica, two calciphile, Section Melanium summiteers

Text and photos, Robert Rolfe.

Applying the Latin epithets *alpina*, *alpinum* and *alpinus*, for present purposes you can corral *Viola alpina*, *Campanula alpina*, *Linum alpinum*, *Oreomecon alpina* subsp. *alpina* (syn. *Papaver alpinum* subsp. *sendtneri*) and *Dianthus alpinus*. All occur on NE Austria's highest mountain, the Schneeberg, under two hours by train south-west from Vienna.

Viola alpina is the focus of these musings. I've known it first hand, off and on, over 40 years. In 1983, Tony Willis gave me one of the two seedlings he'd raised, the collection made in the Romanian Hășmaș Mts, east of Cluj-Napola, by Dieter Zschummel. It prospered, receiving an RHS Award of Merit on March 9th 1985. From both cuttings and the freely-produced seed I soon worked up a considerable stock. But young plants given to others perished in short order; worse still, my own squad was wiped out by the hot summer of 1987. Having had almost too many plants to handle, that year 'solved' my unproblematic problem.

Not me alone who was blasé: I once mustered a floriferous quartet for exhibition that won their respective classes but whose constituents were rejected for further award on the grounds that if the trick could be repeated fourfold, such performances must be routine. On the other hand, at an SRGC Stirling Show, a comparable exemplar received a Certificate of Merit – despite being mistakenly placed at the last minute by my envoy in a class for which it was ineligible!



View of Hochschneeberg looking west north west.



Viola alpina ex Romania.

OVERALL DISTRIBUTION

Romania (not Austria, where it is confined to the district of Neunkirchen) is the country where the viola is most widespread. I can't find a precise mapping of its exact distribution there but have traced a number of localities along the immense, reverse L-shaped trend of the Carpathians that dominate Romania's core. It's certainly present in the western Bucegi Mountains and after that west on floristically celebrated Piatra Craiului, also in the relatively adjacent Făgăraș Mountains, where an altitudinal limit of 2,275m there far exceeds the 2,000m cut-off ordained outwith the Carpathians by Franco Rasetti in his / *Fiori delle Alpi* (1980). In Austria, I've seen it at c. 2,050m, within a few strides of the Schneeberg's Fischerhütte, and a little higher at 2,076m on that same mountain's highest point, Klosterwappen.



Viola alpina.

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Fischerhütte, Kaiserstein (note summit marker top left).



Path south to Klosterwappen.

In some years the flowering period extends to August, but in 2025 an earlier concluding date was indicated. Compared with my two previous visits, in 1989 and 2009, in the second week of June there was appreciably less snow on high, for all that it had been necessary for a snow plough to bulldoze through a substantial drift near the top of the main path. In my hotel, a local newspaper dated 16th May gave maximum and minimum temperatures from the summit of the Schneeberg as 1C and -4C. At the species' lower limit, around 1,500m, the first flowers open towards the end of April, certainly by May.

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Summit snow on the Schneeberg, mid-June 2025.

In June lingering snow patches were restricted to the east-facing buttresses, where the viola was scarce, but *Primula clusiana* was still in late flower, once in a constellation centred by a mighty clump of *P. elatior*. These damp, for most of the day shaded defiles were also home to *Soldanella minima* subsp. *austriaca* and its hybrid with *S. alpina*, to which the name *Soldanella x wettsteinii* has been applied but latterly either overlooked or else ruled out, for *S. x ganderi* is the only combination presently recognised. *Ranunculus alpestris* frequently kept these company but the best plants were massed in favoured spots near the crest of the Kaiserstein, where clumps with 15-20, rarely 30 flowers were in their prime. I've not seen better, not even in Switzerland on the Eiger and other notable Bernese Oberland stations.



Primula clusiana.



Primula elatior.

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Soldanella minima subsp. *austriaca*.

S. x wettsteinii (*minima* subsp. *austriaca* x *alpina*).



Ranunculus alpestris.

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A FEW OTHER SCHNEEBERG PLANTS

By mid-June, at the lower altitude just mentioned, all vestiges of the viola are mantled by a cheering assortment of other plants, most conspicuously bright yellow splashes of *Anthyllis vulneraria* and drifts of *Anemone narcissiflora*, dwarfer than is usually the case, the stems seldom exceeding 20cm. Diffuse in the turf but when subject to less competition forming floriferous patches, some intertwined, near the trackside in limestone rubble and on low mounds (a few of these surely coalescing with anthills, given the milling abundance of those creatures), *Androsace chamaejasme* is more profuse on this mountain than any other signatory of its genus I've witnessed elsewhere.



Anthyllis vulneraria.



Left: *Anemone narcissiflora* .

Below: *Androsace chamaejasme*.



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Anthyllis vulneraria and *Androsace chamaejasme*.



Silene acaulis and *Androsace chamaejasme*.

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Opportunistically, now and then it sprung up in mats of *Silene acaulis*, an accommodating nurse plant whose other charges included *Primula minima* (no longer in flower) and, to my surprise, *Pinguicula alpina*. All four can be found in the Carpathians, where you will also encounter distinguished Schneeberg residents such as *Androsace lactea* (infrequent there, unlike *A. chamaejasme*) and that dwarf interpretation of *Campanula barbata*, the much smaller, analogously bearded *C. alpina*, in flower long before the mountain's other speciality where this genus is concerned, *C. pulla*. The tubby bells are visited by bumblebees and coincidentally I've once or twice observed these buzzing – if not necessarily pollinating – *Viola alpina*, whose flowers are more often attended by flies.



Silene acaulis (*Primula minima* rosettes front centre and left).

THE CARPATHIANS AGAIN

Having touched several times on the Carpathians, I should go on to say that there are further *V. alpina* populations in southernmost Poland and neighbouring Slovakia, the latter occurrences instructively specified on the database website www.pladias.sk Under the relevant page, by selecting the third subheader, *Distribution*, you are presented with a map of the country, divided into grid cells. Seven of these, all in the northern sector representing the High Tatras, have small black squares denoting the species' presence: click on any of these and up comes information on the precise locality, the name of the observer, the date of the record and (not always) the altitude. (I'd assumed that *Viola alpina* might also accompany the Carpathians north to the western corner of Ukraine: seemingly not, for a

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2012 typification of the genus in that country omits it, while listing *V. declinata* and, rather surprisingly, *V. oreades*.)

As illustrated in *The Rock Garden*, vol 26, part 3, Number 104, June 1999, fig. 77, Brian Burrow raised a variant with pale lilac flowers. This he teasingly referred to as 'the good form' whenever we discussed it. The seed donor assured him that it was of Bulgarian provenance, but I doubt this. As with Ukraine, *V. alpina* isn't recorded from that country. In any event, while the text notes that cuttings rooted in six to seven weeks and that rearing seedlings was 'very straightforward', it is long gone. The same goes for a chance hybrid with southern Spanish *V. crassiuscula*, offered ('Few') in the autumn 1986 Lismore Alpines plant list at £4. This sum would also have bought you *Haastia sinclairii*, with a free-flowering form of *Androsace wulfeniana* at £3, so too an albino *Campanula morettiana*, and a Pyrenean selection of *Saxifraga x patens (caesia x aizoides)* only £2. Where could you buy these presently, at any price?



Pedicularis verticillata and *Achillea clavennae*.

My field knowledge of the viola is confined to a couple of Austrian mountains, namely the Schneeberg and – some 20 miles south – Raxalpe, both part of the same group. It is near the top of Raxalpe's 2,007m Heukuppe that I was rewarded for an arduous walk by a flowery sward spangled with spring and trumpet gentians, *Primula auricula*, *Achillea clavennae*, two species of *Pedicularis*... and *Viola alpina*, consistently larger flowered and more richly royal blue than any other manifestations I've known. For a while some representatives prospered in cultivation and were propagated, in alpine houses from North Wales to the Cotswolds.

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Viola alpina ex
Raxalpe.

THE SCHNEEBERG, ROUND TWO

Returning to the
Schneeberg, my
impression is that the
plants' habitat
preferences are more
spartan. I recollect
small tuffets with just



one or two flowers, struggling in still dormant, unkempt turf and *Carex* lawns or similarly slumbering expanses of *Dryas octopetala*. It was much happier at the foot of boulders, huddling in stabilised limestone rubble; cleaving to the risers of turf-banked solifluction terraces; most perilously withstanding fairly frequent foot traffic from hikers and assorted off-piste tourists. There had been an almighty storm the week before my 2025 visit, with quite a few of the corollas battered in consequence.



Viola alpina with manifest storm damage.

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Track north from Vestenkogel.



Viola alpina with *Hornungia alpina* in attendance.

North of the hut, a rough, rocky, meandering track leads to Vestenkogel and beyond there the Sparbacherhütte (1,248m). The upper parts are the most productive best places to search. The viola's most frequent co-habitant is *Hornungia* (syn. *Hutchinsia/Pritzelago*) *alpina*, so condensed that before registering its telltale pinnate, dark green leaves, I thought it might be a white form of either *Petrocallis pyrenaica* or *Noccaea rotundifolia*.



Hornungia alpina.

Despite looking very different from lax Spanish outliers I'd seen just a month before (to the day) in the Cordillera Cantabrica, or the species as represented in gardens, nevertheless this is standard subsp. *alpina* (i.e. not subsp. *austroalpina* nor subsp. *brevicaulis*). I discovered recently that there is an isolated presence in Morocco's Rif Mountains (where it is used as a salad ingredient), also a station for *Arabis caucasica*, another reputedly edible crucifer. It is also present, intermittently in quantity, for the length of a 30 minute, fairly level walk south along the ridge to Klosterwappen (2,076m), the high point of the Schneeberg, marked by weather station antennae and a large cross. A breezy traverse, which might have been the reason that I couldn't detect any scent whatsoever.



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Fritillary butterflies – often linked with violas – were on the wing, but I didn't observe any alighting on *V. alpina*. The disproportionately large flowers, held just above glossy green, precisely scalloped leaves, are in some examples so generously produced that they jostle for position. Light greyish-blue to almost navy, and always with a white eye that extends to a third of the way down the lip, this zone is often patterned with a thin, unbranched pencilling of blackish-blue whiskers oriented mainly downwards and beyond. Another feature: the two lateral petals are smudged towards their base with what can fancifully be described as mascara of the same dark, contrasting hue. Rarely this bleeds down to the lip, each permutation creating a different 'face' – sophisticated versions of the bedding pansies and violettas in which this characteristic has been developed since the nineteenth century. Overall corolla size ranges (my observations) from 18x12mm to 38x32mm, the petals on a sliding scale from slightly splayed and separate to broad and contiguous, rarely overlapping.



Viola alpina in several shades.

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Viola alpina, a plant that had flourished, growing in the middle of a path, despite the perilously close boot marks of successive hikers.



Viola alpina, panorama looking west.

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A CLOSE-RUN THING

Viola alpina, my favourite European member of the genus, wins through in this regard by a short head from Greek *V. poetica*. Fortuitously, in the context of this article, Wilhelm von Spruner in his [*Diagnoses Plantarum Orientalium novarum \(Leipzig, 1846\)*](#) recognised this as *V. alpina* var. *parviflora*, though in truth it and unmistakable *V. alpina* aren't closely related. Instead, *V. poetica* is classified along with light blue or whitish *V. dyris*, a scree-dweller from the Moroccan High Atlas, and bright yellow, Andalusian annual *V. demetria* in Section Melanium subsection Dispaes on the basis of chloroplast sequencing. 'Dispaes' alludes to the trio's marked disparities. In contrast, *V. alpina* is allotted to Sect. Melanium subsection Bracteolatae, the major subgroup that incorporates, as things stand, 98 species (out of 112 for the Section Melanium overall), including *V. calcarata*, *V. cornuta* and *V. lutea*.



Viola poetica on Parnassos.

Viola poetica has a much narrower distribution than *V. alpina*, principally involving four mountains in Sterea Ellas (Parnassos, Giona, Vardousia and Iti). Of the two species, it is far more at home in near vertical eyries, tucked tightly in classic chasmophyte fashion along narrow, lofty crevices or tenanted precipitous ledges and small cavities of those mountains' pock-marked limestone ramparts and uppermost folds at 1,900-2,450m; i.e. more or less to the summit of Parnassos. After some determined but amateur mountaineering on that

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mountain I found it in full flower one red letter day in mid-June, nearly 30 years ago. I knew exactly what to look for, having raised a plant to flowering size from seed offered by nurseryman Les Kreeger a decade before – probably the sole commercial offering. A little snow remained at the foot of the cliffs but flowering had evidently started weeks earlier. Both greekflora.gr and Strid's *Mountain flora of Greece Part One* give the flowering period as from May to August, yet there are images taken of plants in full flower on Giona in mid-April – the same timing as my cherished plant from yesteryear, whose flowers were carried on more attenuated stems than those typical of wild representatives.

Several Balkan violas have relatively recently had considerable extensions to their ranges recorded. *V. kosaninii* (hitherto thought confined to N Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro) was discovered in 1998 at c. 680m near Voras in N Greece, 60 miles distant from well-known populations on Mt Jakupica at 1,800-2,150m. Another disjunct occurrence was logged in 2003 for otherwise Carpathian *V. jooi* on Vukan (NE Serbia) at 780-820m, again 60 miles from its (this time Romanian) nearest station. Around 500 mature plants of *V. jooi* were found in Serbia; compare with *V. poetica* in its toehold Peloponnese outpost, where in 2010 just seven individuals were recorded on Chelmos at 2,039m, alongside *Omphalodes luciliae*. Coincidentally, *V. delphinantha* has its southernmost exclave on the same mountain. For all these anomalies, if *V. alpina* is ever reported from Greece, I'll eat my proverbial hat.



Viola poetica.