

Some Plants of the



Cyclamen repandum, with glowing carmine flowers, is one of the most common of the Corsican plants, and is seen here growing in the woodlands on the lower slopes of La Pianetta, near Porto

Corsican Maquis

THE Mediterranean island of Corsica holds many attractions for the tourist. Every year the French holiday-makers make an annual pilgrimage to rejoice in the summer ritual of basking in the sunshine on its sandy beaches and bathing in the warm, blue sea.

Not one of the least of Corsica's attractions, but one of the least obvious to the summer tourist, is the profusion of wild flowers frequenting the tangled mass of shrubs which clothe most of the island, and which are known collectively as the maquis. The time to sample this delight is in early spring, when the island's truly native charms are most apparent, and little disturbs its natural peace but the occasional distant tinkling from the bells around the necks of the peasants' cattle. So it was that during March and April of 1962 I wandered among the dense, fragrant maquis, along the paths, in search of the many bulbs and orchids which make the island their home and

grow there in a way that they do in no other place in the world.

A jolting ride on a decrepit bus had taken us north from Ajaccio to the tiny village of Porto on the west coast. All around the rugged towers of the pink granite mountains soared upwards, and on the lower slopes of one, La Pianetta, the woodlands were carpeted with the glowing carmine flowers of *Cyclamen repandum*, one of the most common of Corsican plants and perhaps the most delightful. It ramps about in pure leaf-soil in the dark, damp depths of the woods with its paler-pink, autumn-flowering cousin, *C. neapolitanum*, whose ivy leaves, intricately pencilled with white, remained to reveal its presence in the spring. The corms of *C. neapolitanum* were usually easy to collect by grubbing them out with the fingers but those of *C. repandum* grew more deeply below the loose humus and proved difficult to extricate.

Higher up, the Corsican hellebore,

by

J. C. Archibald

This is the first of a two-part article in which Mr. J. C. Archibald describes the flora he encountered when he visited Corsica in March and April of 1962. The second part will appear in next week's issue.

Helleborus argutifolius (*H. corsicus*), grew magnificently in an open clearing, which was obviously intended to shelter the cattle of the maquis during winter. Here, the plants grew compactly to about 3 ft. high in the rich, heavy loam at the bases of massive boulders which littered the ground. There were hundreds of large, apple-green flowers clustering over the boldly-cut, dark and glossy leaves and quite unlike the angularly tall specimens, which struggled to over 6 ft. high, among the maquis lower down. A struggle up a steep boulder-slide took us to the sheer cliffs at the top, where a single plant of *Rosmarinus lavandulaceus* cascaded down in a 30-ft. curtain of pure, deep blue over the pink rock.

Near the mouth of the River Porto, a rocky bank sloped down to the estuary. There we dug cyclamen, orchids and romuleas from the humus-filled crevices and found the giant bulbs of *Pancreatium illyricum*, whose clusters of snow-white, daffodil-like flowers provides one of Corsica's most spectacular sights in May. In the alluvial sand of the estuary *Euphorbia wulfenii* sent up its graceful, well-sculptured

spires of many, small, chartreuse-yellow bells and blue-grey leaves to a height of over 7 ft., and the dark and leathery, cream-splashed leaves of *Arum pictum* peeped out here and there among the scrub.

A Beautiful Stretch of Coastline

The tortuous road to Calvi in the north-west corner of Corsica twists along a remarkably beautiful stretch of coastline. On one side of this fishing-village, a rough path runs between dwarf, spiny hummocks of the golden, grey-leaved *Genista lobelii*, to the Pointe de Revellata. Between the bushes in gravelly clay grew a romulea species possibly *R. requienii*, with little goblets of purest, imperial violet. Though we collected many corms of romulea species throughout the island, this was the only one we found in flower. Romuleas are primitive relatives of the crocuses, to which they are superficially similar, with tiny and often very brilliant flowers. They are usually to be found in Corsica, which is the home of several endemic species, in semi-shady crevices on east or west-facing slopes or growing in the turf of clayey pastures. Later, near Ajaccio, we found two species growing in great profusion in an area of sea-washed turf. I named them tentatively as *R. jordanii* and *R. atroviolacea* but only leaves and seed-capsules were evident at the time of collection. Little information is available regarding this genus and they are almost as little-known botanically as they are horticulturally.

At the base of the Pointe de Revellata, thickets of rosemary were hazy with the blue of the flowers, and in dark rock-pockets we dug the little translucent pearls that were the bulbs of the exquisite, pink, autumn-flowering *Leucojum roseum*. On the top of this promontory, the bitter breath of the fierce "mistral", blowing down from the Alps, sucked every drop of moisture from the soil and the aspect was desolate and barren. This grim place

was the home of *Erodium corsicum*, whose flat rosettes of leaves, wrapped in their grey, felt overcoats, cowered in the crevices of the rocks, waiting to produce their flowers in shades from palest blush-pinks and mauves to deeper ruby.

To the east of Calvi, the land was more sheltered. Along the ditches and in wet places *Allium triquetrum* massed itself. In one damp meadow, *Orchis morio* (a British native), the green-winged orchid, grew in vast quantities, its pink and mauve flowers mingling with the bright, violet tassels of *Muscari comosum*, whose green-brown flowers appear as mere dingy nonentities, beneath the beautiful head-dress of sterile flowers, which crowns the flower-spike. In the stony clay of another pasture, more upon and drier, a multitude of *Asphodelus cerasiferus* jostled their branching, 6 ft. high candelabras of innumerable flesh-pink, brown-striped flowers. The ground at their feet was dotted with the occasional, compact mounds of the 6 in. high, pale sky-blue *Salvia clandestina*, and closer inspection revealed the seed-capsules of a romulea species, which grew in such numbers that the grassy leaves formed a turf of their own in places. Earlier in the season, the ground must have been washed with violet when the first warm rays of the February sun opened the little flowers.

From the grassy meadows near the coast we turned inland towards the Bonifatto Valley, backed by the snow-covered mountains of the Monte Grosso massif. A chance scramble down a maquis-covered bank resulted in the discovery of *Ornithogalum exscapum*. It is one of the most delicate and lovely bulbs that I know. The white flowers like large, upturned snowdrops, sit right on the ground, practically stemless, and the exteriors of the three outer segments are most exquisitely pencilled with grey-green lines. It is nowhere common on the island but where it does occur it grows in large colonies. Here it grew in a clearing,



Muscari comosum in the meadows near Calvi. This species has a beautiful crown of violet sterile flowers with green-brown flowers beneath

where water was percolating downwards from higher up the slope, either among the grass or in damp clay between jagged lumps of granite.

Around the clearing grew bushes of myrtle and the white-flowered *Cistus monspeliensis*. The cistus species are the most frequent components of the maquis at the lower altitudes. *Cistus monspeliensis* was probably the most common but sometimes *C. salvifolius* would appear and less often *C. villosus*, with its large salvers of crumpled, rose satin. However, the shrubs which are the dominant members of the maquis vary greatly with the district. In some places it would be blue rosemary or golden cytisus; elsewhere, it might be *Arbutus unedo* or *Eric arborea*, the tree heath, with its myriads of minute, white, honey-fragrant flowers, which is replaced at higher altitudes by the dwarfer Corsican heath, *Erica stricta*.

Ornithogalum exscapum, growing below the Bonifatto Valley near Calvi



Some Plants

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J. C. Archibald

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Corsican Maquis



Anemone hortensis, above Pietranera, produces flowers in numerous shades from pale, silver-blue through mauves and pinks to magenta

FROM Calvi on the west coast to Bastia on the east the narrow gauge railway climbs and writhes through the island's wholly mountainous interior, in April still white with winter snows. North, towards the hill-village of Acqualta, the woodlands and shady banks were gay with *Anemone hortensis*, whose flowers in every shade from pale, silver-blue through mauves and pinks to magenta, fluttered in a kaleidoscopic profusion in the light breeze. It was difficult to envisage this fragile wildling as a parent of our strain of fat garden anemones, brilliant as they are. The roadside banks north from Bastia were bright with pale-blue periwinkles and gentian-blue borage, mingling with a canary-yellow oxalis, which seems to find Corsica every bit as amenable as its native Mexico. This has naturalised itself in many places round the coast, and the dim woods glowed with the pinks of cyclamen and anemones, but however, there was little of interest among the bulbs to be found in this area. We did, however, see the exquisite *Orchis papilionacea* growing in

In the second and final part of his article Mr. J. C. Archibald describes a further selection of plants, including some interesting orchids, which he encountered while on a visit to Corsica. The first part appeared in our issue of December 18.

the most solid of clays beneath an ancient olive tree. Its ruby and jade-green-veined segments and crystalline lip were of a deeper colour than the delicate pink form which I already grew. Higher up, *O. provincialis*, whose spotted leaves we had found before at Porto, produced its flowers of palest primrose and creamy pink, and a journey north from the picturesque village of Erbalunga yielded early spider-orchid, *Ophrys sphegodes* (a rare British native). A further search for the citron-yellow flowers of this species, with their fantastic intricate lip of slate-blue velvet, was unproductive, although it led to the discovery of a gladiolus, no doubt *G. byzantinus*, pushing its shoots through iron-hard clay.

It was left to Ajaccio, the island's capital, to show what real splendours the Corsican terrestrial orchids can achieve. We collected on the maquis-covered promontory west of the town, called the Pointe de la Parata. There yellow genista and *Lavandula stoechas* arrayed themselves like Byron's Assyrian cohorts, "all gleaming in purple and gold"; and, among the shrubs in countless numbers, grew the Corsican serapias species, the most wonderful of all Mediterranean orchids with their strange, hooded flowers, each hanging out a huge, flopping lip

from the veined bracts. *Serapias lingua*, the most common one, varied in colour from muddy mediocrity through buff and pale pink to deeper ruby and even a pure-white weakling, whose tiny tubers grew in a patch of terra rossa. More splendid was *S. cordigera* with a broader, heart-shaped, velvety-crimson lip, but the most magnificent of all was *S. neglecta*. The last is one of the rarest of all European orchids and I was elated at discovering its clusters of massive flowers in subtle tones of apricot and buff-yellow, nestling close to the ground. At the time, *S. neglecta* seemed to embody the ultimate in beauty, but later, on a most propitious chance sortie into the maquis, we came upon an extensive colony of the most breathtakingly beautiful of all the orchids we had found. Their opulent flowers lay like piles of brilliant velvet on the grass, in shades of orange, burnt-apricot and crimson. They were certainly serapias, but which one? Detailed examination revealed them to be natural hybrids between *S. cordi-*



Orchis provincialis, with spotted leaves and palest primrose or creamy-pink flowers, seen growing on wet banks near Acqualta



A stemless form of *Matthiola tricuspidata* from the Pointe de la Parata, Ajaccio

gera and *S. neglecta*, showing the finest characteristics of both parents.

At the end of the Pointe de la Parata grows a most lovely and rare plant. It is hardly a plant of the Corsican maquis but as *Erodium corsicum* has found mention; so must *Matthiola tricuspidata*, which clings to steep cliffs crumbling down into the

sea. The stemless forms of this species are endemic to Corsica and Sardinia. Their large, four-petaled flowers of pale, translucent lavender lie flat on the close clumps of crinkled, lobed leaves, clad in grey wool. Having sampled the delights which Corsica provides at sea-level, in the form of the erodium and *Matthiola tricuspidata*

(a rare casual to the British Isles), as well as its better-known yellow relative, *Morisia monanthos*, one cannot but desire to find the truly alpine treasures which make their homes on the island's high mountains and which in early spring, when the maquis is in flower, still sleep beneath their blanket of snow.



Left: *Serapias neglecta* crossed with *S. cordigera* (a natural hybrid) found among cistus on the Pointe de la Parata, near Ajaccio. Right: The most common serapias in Corsica, *S. lingua*, produces flowers in various colours from buff through pale pink to deeper ruby and even pure white

