



Sailing the French & Italian Rivas

Q & A with AHS Host Panayoti Kelaidis

From your perspective as a plant explorer, what makes the plant diversity of the Côte d'Azur and Italian Riviera so horticulturally compelling?

The rugged hills and coastline stretching from the Pyrenees in the West to the Maritime Alps in the East represent an area of great botanical diversity: in addition to its Mediterranean floral elements, all sorts of plants found refuge here during the ice ages—making this area a hot spot botanically. This richness and diversity are reflected in the garden design practiced here for the last millennium and more.

From the high art of Chagall and Picasso to the visual drama of terraced gardens and cliffside villages, this AHS travel program offers a powerful interplay between landscape and artistic expression. How do you see gardens themselves as a form of artistic storytelling?

Gardens are the interface between Nature and Civilization. Originally gardens “guarded” mankind from Nature’s wildness—the Mediterranean garden movement which originated here represents gardens as a bridge between humanity and “the wild”... This region possesses a wide spectrum of formal “civilized” gardens and the current movement towards harmonizing with Nature.

You’ve introduced countless plant species to public gardens and traveled extensively across ecosystems, from the Andes to the Alps. What are you most excited to share with AHS travelers on this program?

This region boasts a fine representation of Mediterranean wildflowers: plants with epithets “*monspessulanus*” or “*liguricus*” reflect that rich flora. But generations of keen gardeners have imported exotic plants from all over the globe to grow here. We can expect to see outstanding specimens—both native and foreign—at every turn. This area is basically a gigantic outdoor botanical garden!

Rock gardening has been a hallmark of your career, and the Riviera and Ligurian Coast are rich in rocky terrain and Mediterranean flora. Will travelers encounter any plant communities or natural landscapes here that echo or inform rock gardening traditions?

This region has been a magnet for rock gardeners due to the rich native flora and rocky terrain: many rock garden classics like *Primula marginata* and *Aphyllanthes monspeliensis* are endemic here. Significantly, some trace the beginning of the Renaissance to the day the poet Petrarch climbed Mount Ventoux on 26 April 1336, reveling in the glory of nature rather than fearing it. His insights in the letter he wrote about this climb are the very heart of natural gardening—especially rock gardening.

Gardeners often look to the Mediterranean for drought-tolerant planting ideas. Are there specific plants or design strategies on this trip that you think home gardeners could learn from and adapt to their own climates, especially in the American West?

Olivier Filippi, who gardens near Montpellier, is regarded as the leading authority on dry summer gardening on the planet. The Mediterranean coasts of France and Italy have been a hotbed of adapting native plants and dry gardening for decades. Many of the most important and reliable cultivars of Xeriscape plants—lavender, various thymes and rosemary—originate here. Basically, this tour will be a crash course in Xeriscape!

This itinerary offers both wild and cultivated beauty, from the natural drama of the Cinque Terre coastline to the formal symmetry of historic villas. How do you see the relationship between wild landscapes and designed gardens evolving in today's horticultural world?

Whether you prefer rigid formality of topiary in a garden, or wild naturalism, seeing either style done to perfection can't help but strike your fancy. For hundreds of years, keen gardeners—many with unlimited means—have played out their fantasies in this enduring region. I can't imagine anything more enchanting than strolling through garden masterpieces like these at the height of spring!