



UNESCO Treasures of Ancient Greece
Q & A With AHS Host Panayoti Kelaidis

Greece is often celebrated for its mythology and archaeology, but it also has an extraordinary horticultural heritage. What do you think surprises travelers most when they begin to see Greece through a botanical lens rather than a purely historical one?

Greece is generally acknowledged to possess the highest plant diversity (acre per acre) of any country in Europe: both Greece and Italy have around 6,000 native plant species—however Greece is just half the size of Italy. Many Greek wildflowers are extremely showy: this trip is timed to see the start of the autumn wildflower display. A large number of our garden stalwarts—especially herbs—are found wild in Greece. You can count on seeing Acanthus, Oregano, and a bevy of thymes, and classic garden plants like Jupiter’s Beard (*Centranthus ruber*) will festoon the classic ruins where they are protected from sheep and goats.

The Peloponnese is home to several of the world’s great olive-growing regions. From a horticultural standpoint, what makes these ancient olive groves so unique, and how do they connect to Greece’s agricultural and cultural history?

Greece is believed to be where olives were first domesticated. In fact, there are olive trees that have been ascertained to be at least 3,000 years old. These were already ancient during Greece’s golden age and bearing fruit, and they still do today. A large proportion of “Italian” olive oil originates in Greece, where many, perhaps most Greeks still have olives, and often harvest and process them personally. Greeks consume an average of 12-24 liters of olive oil per person per year, far more than Spain or Italy!

This program visits five UNESCO World Heritage Sites: Epidaurus, Mycenae, Mystras, Olympia, and Delphi. Which site has the most powerful botanical or landscape story, and what should travelers look for beyond the stones and temples?

Anyone botanically inclined will be surprised at how diverse the flowers are at each of the ancient ruins, and each one seems to have a different suite of plants. Greece is especially rich in “chasmophytes”—plants that grow only in narrow crevices. Ancient ruins proffer a perfect perch for these—although I have seen nuns at Mystras busy scraping rare campanulas off the ancient church walls. Fortunately, they always miss some! Our trip will be timed to see the first fall crocus, cyclamen and other fall bulbs emerge from dormancy—an exciting time!

You have explored plant life across continents, from high alpine zones to Mediterranean coastlines. How does Greece’s plant diversity compare, and what Mediterranean species or ecosystems do you most look forward to sharing with travelers?

Greece is universally recognized as a botanical hotspot for biodiversity. I find Greece every bit as dazzling in its plant variety as Western China, Mexico or South Africa—other places renowned for their plant richness. Because Greece is so rocky, and since rock gardens are my specialty, I am particularly fond of plants that grow on cliffs. My favorite Greek plants are the infinite variety of bulbs—especially cyclamen, crocus, colchicum and Sternbergia—all of which begin to bloom in Fall. The genus Campanula has a major center of distribution in Greece with dozens of taxa. And then the endlessly variable family of mints that fill the Greek meadows and our spice cabinets!

How did plants, gardens, and natural landscapes shape ancient Greek concepts of health and medicine, and what can modern gardeners learn from these traditions?

Both modern medicine and botany trace their roots back to Theophrastus, who was a contemporary of Alexander the Great. He wrote the first botanical and pharmacological treatise. Many great thinkers and practitioners across Ancient Greece like Dioscurides and Galen expanded this knowledge which now populates gardens and medicine cabinets across the world: Greece was the birthplace of our modern health consciousness!

As someone with deep personal roots in Greece and a lifetime of horticultural exploration, what moment on this voyage do you think will most move or delight travelers, whether botanically, historically, or emotionally?

Over the decades of my travel in Greece, I have experienced profound epiphanies at every archeological site I've visited: the ancients had an uncanny way of finding spots of extraordinary physical beauty to build upon. The rich tapestry of beautiful plants, twining among the mellow marble in the crisp Greek light seem to spark an emotional and spiritual awareness that invariably delivers insights and a sort of bliss. Walking under the Lion Gate at Mycenae, you realize that Agamemnon, Menelaus and Helen undoubtedly trod the same spot. I have marveled at orchids glimmering among the marbles at Delphi—knowing that some ancient undoubtedly did the same. Greece is the land of eternal recurrence.

You have introduced hardy Mediterranean plants into North American horticulture through your explorations. Which plants or plant groups on this journey might inspire home gardeners to rethink what's possible in their own climate zones?

I am continually shocked at how hardy Greek plants turn out to be. I have grown hundreds of plants from Greece in my Denver Zone 5 garden. I know there are a lot more that should join these. I have seen Greek plants thriving across the USA and Canada in every corner of the land. There are many more that I know are waiting to populate gardens across North America. Every trip to Greece is unwittingly a sort of research mission or plant exploration journey—and this will be no exception!