Native Plants of Cyprus

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Introduction

Cyprus, the third largest island in the Mediterranean, is a land marked by extraordinary botanical diversity. Its unique position at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa, combined with a varied topography and distinct climatic influences, has shaped a flora comprising almost 2,000 recorded species. Among these, a striking number are endemic—found nowhere else on Earth—attesting to the island’s long history of isolation and biological evolution. For botanists, naturalists, and nature lovers alike, Cyprus offers an incredible living laboratory for exploring plant diversity, adaptation, and conservation.

The island’s landscapes are mosaics of habitats ranging from lush mountain forests to arid coastal cliffs, expansive grasslands, and rich wetlands. Each of these environments hosts its own unique communities of plants, woven together into intricate ecological webs. The Troodos and Pentadaktylos mountains, soaring above the lowlands, serve as refuge for some of the rarest and most extraordinary plant species, many of which are restricted to these remote and often inaccessible habitats. Coastal zones, grasslands, and wetlands similarly nurture specialized flora that have adapted to harsh conditions of salt, drought, fire, and poor soils.

The plants of Cyprus are not just a matter of scientific interest or aesthetic beauty; they are an integral part of the island's cultural heritage and natural resilience. Since ancient times, Cypriots have interacted with their native flora, using plants for food, medicine, construction, rituals, and ornamentation. Many villages and local traditions are intimately tied to the gathering, cultivation, and celebration of wildflowers, herbs, and trees. Preserving these plants ensures the continuity of these traditions and the ecosystem services they provide, such as supporting pollinators, enriching soils, and stabilizing local microclimates.

Yet the native plants of Cyprus today face mounting pressures. Development, agricultural intensification, climate change, wildfires, invasive species, and overgrazing threaten to erode the rich tapestry of life that defines the island. Some endemic species are now confined to only a handful of sites, their survival contingent upon targeted conservation efforts and public awareness. The struggle to balance economic growth and environmental stewardship is acutely felt in Cyprus, as in many places of outstanding natural value.

Despite these challenges, Cyprus stands as a beacon for conservation success stories. Initiatives to protect habitat, restore degraded ecosystems, and safeguard genetic resources have multiplied in recent decades. The creation of protected areas, plant micro-reserves, seed banks, and nature education programs all reflect a growing

recognition of the importance of native flora. Collaborative research and international partnerships ensure that knowledge and strategies for conservation continue to evolve.

This book seeks to provide a comprehensive guide to the native plants of Cyprus, weaving together scientific understanding, field experience, and cultural context. By exploring the island’s botanical inheritance chapter by chapter, readers will gain insight into the profound richness of Cyprus’s flora, the challenges it confronts, and the urgent and ongoing efforts to ensure its survival for generations yet to come.

CHAPTER ONE: The Island of Cyprus: Geography, History, and Botanical Exploration

Cyprus, often referred to as the "Jewel of the Mediterranean," is an island steeped in a long and complex history, a history that has profoundly shaped its landscapes and, in turn, its remarkable flora. Situated strategically in the eastern Mediterranean, at the nexus of Europe, Asia, and Africa, its geographical position has made it a coveted prize throughout millennia, attracting various peoples and empires. This constant flux of human activity, coupled with the island's distinct geology and topography, has created a unique stage upon which its native plants have evolved and endured.

The island's physical geography is a story of dramatic contrasts. Two prominent mountain ranges dominate the landscape: the Troodos Massif in the southwest and the less extensive Pentadaktylos (or Kyrenia) range running along the northern coast. Between these two mountainous spines lies the Mesaoria plain, a fertile, low-lying area that has historically been the agricultural heartland of Cyprus. The Troodos, a majestic ophiolite complex formed from uplifted oceanic crust, is the geological core of the island, with Mount Olympus reaching the highest elevation. This unique geological origin has given rise to varied rock formations and soil types, which in turn support distinct plant communities. The Kyrenia range, though lower in altitude, also contributes to the island's varied topography. The interplay of these mountain ranges, the central plain, and the extensive coastline—featuring sandy beaches, rocky cliffs, and salt lakes—creates a mosaic of habitats, each offering different conditions for plant life.

The geological history of Cyprus is a fascinating tale of tectonic movements. The Troodos Massif began its formation around 90 million years ago as part of the Tethys Ocean floor, a process that involved the subduction of the African Plate beneath the Eurasian Plate. Over millions of years, this oceanic crust was uplifted, eventually emerging from the sea. Further tectonic activity, particularly in the Pliocene epoch, continued to shape the island, leading to the uplift of both the Troodos and Kyrenia ranges and the formation of the Mesaoria basin. This geological dynamism has not only sculpted the landforms but also influenced the distribution and evolution of plant species, contributing to the island's high level of endemism. The diverse rock formations, including the unique serpentine soils found in the Troodos, are particularly important in supporting specialized flora adapted to these challenging conditions.

Human history on the island stretches back thousands of years, with the earliest indisputable evidence of human presence dating to the 10th millennium BCE at sites like Akrotiri Aetokremnos. The arrival of settlers from Anatolia around 7000 BCE

marked a significant shift, introducing agriculture and domesticates such as emmer wheat, einkorn, sheep, and goats, fundamentally altering the landscape and setting the stage for human-environment interactions that would continue to shape the flora. Early agricultural practices and the exploitation of natural resources, such as copper from the Troodos foothills, led to changes in vegetation cover, including deforestation in certain areas.

Throughout antiquity, Cyprus's strategic location made it a focal point for numerous powers, including the Phoenicians, Assyrians, Egyptians, and Persians. Later, it became part of the Hellenistic world under Alexander the Great and subsequently a Roman province. Each period of rule left its mark on the island's cultural and physical landscape. The establishment of cities, development of infrastructure, and agricultural practices, while vital for human societies, inevitably impacted the natural environment and its plant life. Ancient writers, like Strabo, noted the extensive forests of the Mesaoria in earlier times, suggesting a significantly different landscape than what is seen today, a change largely attributed to human activities such as cultivation and grazing.

The history of botanical exploration in Cyprus is a more recent endeavor, gaining momentum as European naturalists began to systematically document the flora of the Mediterranean. Early accounts of Cypriot plants were often part of broader surveys of the Greek Isles and the Levant. One of the notable early figures was John Sibthorp, an English botanist who visited Cyprus in the late 18th century as part of his grand tour of Greece and Western Anatolia. His work, which contributed to the monumental "Flora Graeca," provided some of the first documented records of Cypriot flora using the Linnaean system of classification. However, the precise origins of some of the specimens he collected from Cyprus remained uncertain.

In the following decades, botanical interest in Cyprus continued to grow, with several British botanists making significant contributions during the period of British administration (1878-1960). These researchers expanded the list of known species and began to understand the unique aspects of the island's flora. Jens Holmboe, a Norwegian botanist who visited in 1905, conducted extensive research that formed the basis for his "Studies on the Vegetation of Cyprus," a valuable early work detailing the island's plant life and its relationship to the Mediterranean region. These early explorations laid the groundwork for a more comprehensive understanding of Cyprus's rich botanical heritage.

The compilation of detailed floras, such as R.D. Meikle's "Flora of Cyprus," published in the late 20th century, marked a significant milestone in the study of the island's plants. Meikle's extensive work, based on years of research and fieldwork, provided a comprehensive account of the island's vascular plants, including descriptions, distribution, and identification keys. His work also introduced a system of subdividing the island into phytogeographical regions, a framework still used today to understand

plant distribution patterns. These systematic efforts have been crucial in documenting the island's plant diversity and providing a foundation for conservation efforts.

Archaeological research in Cyprus has also contributed to our understanding of the island's environmental history and the long-term interactions between humans and plants. Studies of plant remains from archaeological sites provide insights into past vegetation cover, agricultural practices, and the use of plants by ancient populations. This paleoethnobotanical evidence, combined with geoarchaeological approaches, helps reconstruct past landscapes and understand how human activities have shaped the present-day flora. The study of ancient agricultural features, such as water-saving terraces, highlights the ingenuity of past inhabitants in adapting to the island's climate and managing water resources for cultivation.

The ongoing study of Cyprus's geography and history continues to inform our understanding of its native plants. The island's isolation as an island, while situated near major landmasses, has played a crucial role in the evolution of its unique endemic species. The varied topography and geological history have created diverse microhabitats, allowing for the diversification of plant life. The long history of human occupation and the various ways people have utilized and managed the land have left an indelible mark on the vegetation, creating cultural landscapes that are intertwined with the natural environment. This intricate relationship between the island's physical attributes, its long human history, and the evolution of its flora is a central theme in appreciating the native plants of Cyprus.

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