



PERPLEXING
PERIWINKLES
&
MYSTERIOUS
MILKWEEDS

Nerium oleander, near Antalya, Turkey



Periploca graeca, near Antalya, Turkey

Some plant families seem to exude the exotic. Orchids are charismatic and alluring, bulbous plants seem to have many of us hooked on their richly varied colours and forms, not to mention the wonderful places they chose to grow. Daisies provide dazzling abundance. Another, lesser-known family combines beauty with the positively offbeat and outlandish; Apocynaceae Let's being with something familiar; periwinkle, though this too can choose some amazing locations. I recall finding the localised endemic; *Muscari adili* on a marly, rubble slope, surrounded by painted hills of many layered and eroded fine strata in central Turkey. Growing alongside that were the trailing stems of a periwinkle; *Vinca herbacea*, beset with 'propellers' of lilac-blue flowers. In another part of the world (Kyrgyzstan) I have found the broad-leaved *Allium karataviense* growing in heavy screes pouring down stony slopes peppered with upright clumps of *Vinca erecta*. Closer to home the impressive flowering of *Nerium oleander* colours the macchie for many weeks in June, July and August. It is probably the most familiar of all periwinkles, now a global plant that appears in virtually all Mediterranean and warm temperate climates. It tolerates a degree of frost and is virtually bombproof in its native land (even goats avoid it) with only a few predators such as the lovely oleander hawkmoth choosing to feed on the foliage. Oleander and periwinkle are joined with (and sometimes grow with) a third Med species, the climbing shrub *Periploca graeca*. And yet its flowers are oh-so different and



Vinca herbacea, Turkey



Tweedia stipitata



Asclepias speciosa, northern California

it was until recently included within a second family; Asclepiadaceae, but this has now been entirely subsumed within Apocynaceae, thus uniting periwinkles with some wonderfully weird flowers. To begin with there are the milkweeds, famed as a food plant of the monarch butterfly, though their flowers appeal to many different insects including delicate glasswings in Costa Rica. Widespread in North America is *Asclepias speciosa*, a robust herb with dense globular clusters of pale pink stars. It is frequent along roadsides and in rough ground in California. Related *A. cordifolia* also has interesting shaped flowers as does *Tweedia stipitata*, a climber from central Chile with similar 'balls' of twisted stars, affixed to climbing stems that ramble over matorral shrubs and the statuesque columns of tall cacti. They are especially noticeable in rare years of heavy rain, when the desert bursts into life. At this time daintier relatives can be found too, for example *Diplolepis geminiflora*, the flowers deliciously scented. In the Atacama Desert there is also a common yellow-flowered Apocynaceae shrub; *Skytanthus acutus*.

The genus *Asclepias* also occurs South Africa, where a distinct colour shift can be seen, with most of tending to the more cryptic rather than showy. South Africa has a wide and diverse selection of species and the family as a whole has radiated strongly in the grasslands of the east. Here, we



Asclepias cordifolia, Yosemite, California



Asclepias currasavica with glasswing butterfly, Costa



Diplolepis geminiflora, Ovalle, Chile



Ceropegia sp., Sichuan, China



Asclepias macropus, Underberg, South Africa

also find the various *Schizoglossum* such as *hamatum* and the sombre near black of *S. atropurpureum*. These vast grasslands are a rich hunting ground for such plants and when I visit, I find myself pursuing these as intently as tracking down some of the many terrestrial orchids. At a small nature reserve near Underberg, there were not only the fabulous big spikes of the orchid *Disa cooperi*, but both *Asclepias macropus* and the delicate green-white globes of *Xysmatolobium involucreatum* to distract my attention and as the evening light began to wane fast it became a photo dash between subjects. These plants do have to be sought out at times, their populations are rather scattered and local. By contrast, shrubby *Gomphocarpus frutescens* is common and widespread across the country, the pendant ivory flowers morphing into bizarre inflated fruits. Indeed, the fruits of many Apocynaceae are extraordinary in themselves, invariably greatly elongated or enlarged.

South Africa's wealth of this family extends to another group; those with cactus-like swollen stems, often knobbly or spiny along prominent ribs. They are popular as houseplants and among the succulent fraternity and comprise plants such as *Stapelia*, *Orbea*, *Caralluma* and *Hoodia*. They are typified by their outsize and downright bizarre flowers, in some huge starfish-like blooms that smell strongly of rotting flesh. I know only too well, I have a good collection on my



Gomphocarpus frutescens, South Africa
INSET: *Xysmatolobium stockenstromense* fruit.



Schizoglossum hamatum, Tenahead, South Africa



Schizoglossum atropurpureum, Sani Pass, South Africa



Xysmatolobium involucreatum, South Africa



Orbea variegata, Cape Town, South Africa



Adenium obesum, Socotra



Edithocolea grandis, Socotra



Hoodia gordonii, South Africa

balcony in Antalya, which grow and flower very well; a mixed blessing when there are three or four flowers open at once on a warm summer day. In the wild, I have seen *Orbea variegata* in flower in South Africa, flourishing on coastal rocks in the Western Cape in March. However, these intriguing plants extend their range well north, with for example, *Caralluma europaea* in southern Spain and Sicily. There is too, a clutch of naturalised aliens including *Gomphocarpus frutescens* (South Africa) and *Asclepias syriaca* (North America).

But, to round off let's drift down through the Horn of Africa and across towards the Arabian Peninsula, where the magical island of Socotra rises abruptly into high cliffs from the Arabian Sea. A rugged land of tortured limestone pavements, deep wadis and blissful sweeping white sands beaches, it is home to one of the finest collections of these wonderful plants. here the oleander has transformed into the swollen bottle tree; *Adenium obesum*, an oleander on steroids, that takes on all manner of distorted and irregular forms all topped by showy pink flowers that are unmistakably oleander. Plenty of other outlandish and exaggerated flora grows here too from dragon trees to cucumber trees, trailing succulent stemmed vines (*Sarcostemma*) and similar cactoid species to be seen in South Africa, most notably *Caralluma socotrana* and the superbly macabre *Edithcolea grandis*, which looks as though it might snap shut on a prying finger at any moment.



Caralluma socotrana, Socotra