

WILD ASIA



Fritillaria eduardii, Balken, Kyrgyzstan in April

Winter may be biting or at least nibbling around the edges, but before long the buds and bulbs of spring will be appearing and the landscapes of the Northern Hemisphere will once again be awash with flowers. Such bounty comes with an inevitable frustration - where to go to enjoy this fleeting flower-filled time? With travel now available to us once again, the lands of the former Silk Road offer up a beguiling choice and these certainly keep us busy every year.

Turkey (naturally) features high on this list, and not just because we live here, it genuinely is one of the best plant destinations there is. In the Mediterranean, spring begins in January-February with orchids and bulbs. I had not realised quite how many crocuses grew around us until the ironic benefits of coronavirus meant I had the chance to properly look around and I found a great many populations and species of these and many other spring delights. Fast forward to May and a completely new suite of plants colours the higher in the Taurus mountains, and some of the finest plants appear now and into summer. The higher, cooler lands of the Anatolian Plateau (above 1000-metres) and the bulb-rich east



Ophrys argolica subsp. *climacis*, near Antalya

Crocus biflorus Ak Dagi form, W Turkey in March





Corydalis ledebouriana, Ala Bel, Kyrgyzstan in April



Chionocharis hookeri, Baima Shan, Yunnan, China in June.



Tulipa rosea

Tulipa rosea, Kyrgyzstan in April

(above 1500-metres) do not get started fully until late-April-May, again continuing into early summer.

From Ankara east to western China the Silk Road is unified by the Irano-Turano floristic region and a similar climate. Thus, the unlocking of the season is repeated farther east, in another botanical hotspot; Central Asia, where the riot of bulbs in April is backed by the majestic Tien Shan. The quantity some appear in is mind-blowing. The freedom of Asia is what makes it so special, the freedom to roam and explore in lands largely devoid of fences and walls. Such barriers would never suit the hordes of wandering stock that descend on these pastures in summer and so most areas are completely free of artificial impediments. I can say this largely extends to China, where there are still vast spaces in Yunnan, Sichuan and Qinghai that are fenceless and free. The stiff hike onto Baima Shan to see the sky-blue speckled cushions of *Chionocharis hookeri* is unfettered and only limited by one's lung capacity (at 4600-metres). A far cry from the territorial tendencies of much of the West. It did take make me a while to fully appreciate this unrivalled space, but once realised it is hard to give up.



Cyripedium lichiangensis, Yunnan



Trollius altaicus, Ala Bel, Kyrgyzstan in June.



Fritillaria sewerzowii, Ala Bel, Kyrgyzstan in April (above)

Lilium ciliatum, Zigana Pass, Turkey in June (left)

China has finally hinted that we may be able to go back and enjoy its wilderness in the near future, we wait and see where and when, but expect 2024 to be a big China flower year. Until then there are the wide-open steppes of Central Asia to contend with, a place that perhaps encapsulates the Silk Road more than any other, offering not just the floral treasures but with a cultural aside few can match (maybe Turkey), where blue-tiled architectural masterpieces lie an hour from passes swathed in irises and tulips. A convoluted knot of mountains and geopolitical borders creates intrigue as to what comes next, but the passes and deep valleys continue to throw up pleasures and surprises from vast bulb carpets to stately stands of *Fritillaria eduardii* or tulips of rare refinement. These are lands to be viewed in spring and summer, where the transition from snow to foxtail-lily studded meadow via uncountable bulbs is remarkable. Few are more dramatic than the 3175-metre-high Ala Bel pass in Kyrgyzstan, where in April dense stands of *Fritillaria sewerzowii* vie alongside sheets of *Corydalis ledebouriana* and *Colchicum luteum*. Two months later and uncountable *Primula algida* paint the same turf pink with thousands of golden *Trollius altaicus*.

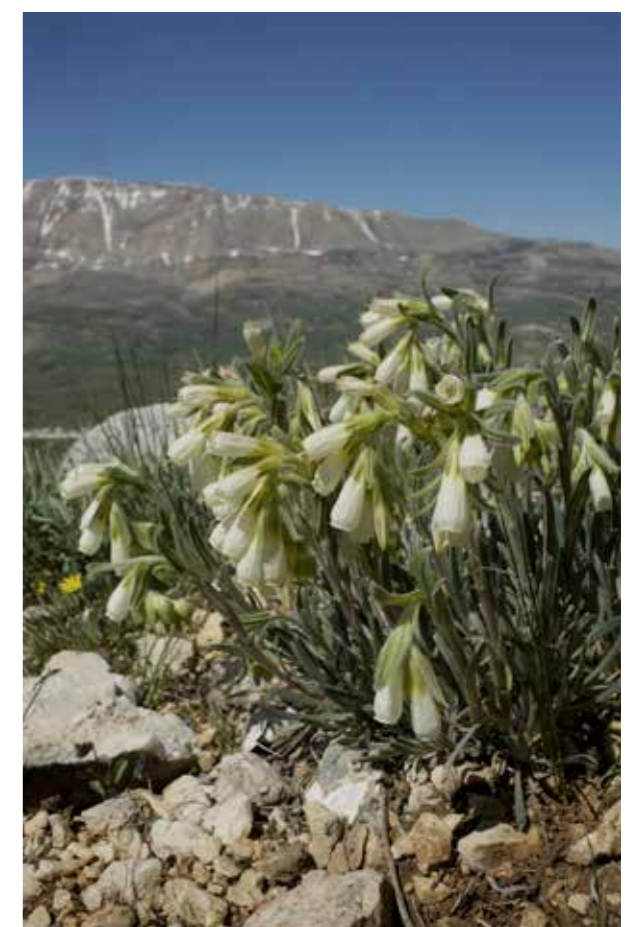
I witness the same in eastern Turkey, where I visit high yaylas still sodden with snowmelt, where irises, trollius and myriad squills briefly coat the short tuft, replaced by towering herbs and lilies that choke the tall meadows by July, the transformation is wondrous. Variations can be seen in Armenia and Georgia, two more wonderful destinations, the former combining elements from Iran (such as sumptuous oncocyclus irises) with the drama of the Caucasus, both offering some fine cultural treats within their complex landscapes, with precariously positioned churches, much as Tibetan monasteries always have the best view in Sichuan. I suppose both clergies require a view to contemplate.

The drama of change is perhaps less so in my Mediterranean home, where summer drought prevents the development of such lush tall meadows, but nonetheless the parade of species continues from spring bulbs to a rich alpine flora that extends right through summer, much of it set near stunning cedar forests, above magnificent coastlines or in deserted mountains. And, as in much of Silk Road Asia in spring, there really is so much space that it never feels overcrowded or touristy and I still struggle to find a fence to hinder my freedom to move from place to place.

It's only whether my legs can keep walking that ever stops me, or needing to get back and pick the kids up from school on time!



Iris paradoxa, Armenia in May



Onosma armenum, W Turkey in early May

Papaver ocellatum, Kyrgyzstan in April

