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How to enjoy the Silk Road's wild flowers without leaving home



Robin Lane Fox

A new book about the colourful flora found along the ancient route from Turkey to China offers 'a glimpse of paradise'

Beyond our gardens stretch the wild floras of the world. The sight of a thousand wild gentians in flower in a meadow alters the way we look on two such plants that we have grown ourselves in our own garden. It does not diminish the pleasure of a homegrown duo, but enhances it. If we know them in the wild, we see our captives framed by the profusion from which they have derived.

Keen gardeners recognise a different tension. When wild flowers abroad are at their finest, their own gardens need daily care and appreciation. Life is full of promises to see this or that, postponed by the wish to work, walk and weed among what has been planted at home. As the garden warms up and serious work begins, I have been travelling by the next-best ticket: photographs.



Rheum alexandrae in Sichuan

Christopher and Basak Gardner have written and illustrated the most beautiful new book titled *Flora of the Silk Road: An Illustrated Guide*. Their book has taken me vicariously from Syria to China and has given me more pleasure than any colour-designed book I have read in years. Basak was head of the herbarium at the botanic garden in Istanbul. Christopher has had a plant named after him in the Turkish mountains, the *Bellevalia chrisii*. Nobody named the Robinia tree after me. Christopher's namesake in nature is not as lovely as the plants he has photographed while travelling from Turkey to China. He is an expert leader of tours among the flora along the ancient Silk Road (viranatura.com). If you come back with only a 10th as many photographs and mental snapshots, then the long trek and the food along its later stages will be forgiven.



Paraquilegia microphylla in Yunnan

For a gardener, the book is like a glimpse of paradise. For years I have battled to grow an ornamental wild rhubarb with rust-red little flowers among lemon-yellow bracts. It grew excellently on the lower slopes of the great Alpinum in the botanic garden in Munich where I weeded in the 1960s. I took seedlings home and found them to be difficult to grow unless they had abundant rain and wet. They came and went, were replaced, looked good and then disappeared, especially in the dry British 1990s. The Gardners now illustrate a fine group of this creamy yellow wild rhubarb flowering and "bracting" in a boulder-strewn plateau in Sichuan known as the Haizi Shan. They describe how the nearby edges of the Yangtze river become "marshy flats" in which this rhubarb's flowers "erupt like floral rockets" in the summer. No wonder they are so happy. They are in the marshy conditions which they love. Looking at their picture I fancied myself in heaven, briefly allowed to see where my dead rheums have gone to flower happily in their next life.

The main Silk Road ran eastward through deserts to the eventual seat of the Chinese court. Excusably, the Gardners stretch their book's title and give us highlights from "related trade routes" running to the south and west. They therefore include some Chinese plants that are legendarily beautiful. Maybe you grow the famous "blue poppy" or *Meconopsis*, especially if you garden on cool acid soil in Scotland and Ireland. Its intense sky-blue flowers are indeed marvellous but in the Himalayas and China there are others with flowers of scarlet, yellow or deep violet. More than 40 species are known in China alone, including three in Tibet and a deep maroon one found near Mount Everest. Near the Stone Mountain of south Qinqhai the Gardners show the dark mauve-blue rounded flowers and dense white stamens of *Meconopsis lancifolia*, hitherto unknown to me. They describe it as "incredible". It has the power of a true celeb. Its photo makes me dream of seeing it, just the two of us, me and the round-flowered *Meconopsis* with nobody there to interrupt us.



Crocus korolkowii in Tajikistan



As ever, the Chinese flora holds the highest number of aces. It includes more than 300 species of primula, flowering so profusely that I forgive the occasional photo which is blurred by all the colour. There are masses of endemic Chinese orchids, swaths of bright yellow *Clematis tangutica* and rhododendrons as far as the eye can see. The Gardners warn that a big sweep of rhododendrons may be found in full flower one year, but



Tulipa tschimganica near Chimgan, Uzbekistan

have next to no flower when visited the following year. However, there is usually another sweep that will be at its best elsewhere on the route.

Off the true Silk Road, in northwest Yunnan, is a plant lover's dream landscape. In its rocks there is the fabulously elegant little *Paraquilegia* that refuses to grow in damp old Britain and show its lilac-blue flowers outdoors. There are open flowers on bulbs called *Nomocharis* which only consider life in Britain in cool, damp regions. There are hanging yellow fritillaries densely marked with green and black spots. Wonderful though the flowers can be on the Silk Road, the Chinese "related trade routes" have the most sublime plants and the most dramatic landscapes.

The Silk Road itself has had a long history that does not feature in the Gardners' botanical book. They say little about fruits. Eastward from central Asia many fine varieties travelled down the road to amaze the courtiers in Tang dynasty China. The "golden peaches of Samarkand" became a prized delight. Westwards from the Tien Shan mountains came sweet forms of the apple which proliferated locally. They were carried in the stomachs of travelling pack animals and expelled as seeds in their droppings. From these parents our sweet apples are now believed to have derived.

Early in their book, the Gardners show a superb vista of yellow *Crocus gargaricus* in Turkey on the Uludag mountain near Bursa. There is more to this crocus than they say. When the goddess Hera wished to seduce her husband Zeus and take his eye off the Trojan War, she did so, Homer tells us, on a carpet of crocus and hyacinth which he had caused to grow beneath them. Here on Uludag is the very crocus that Zeus summoned up before falling asleep after heavenly sex. It is a fitting beginning to this travel by camera through flowers of divine beauty.

'Flora of the Silk Road: An Illustrated Guide' (2014) by Christopher Gardner and Basak Gardner, published by IB Turis, priced £35

Photographs: Christopher Gardner

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