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tours 



ALPINE GARDEN
SOCIETY Val
D'isere & Mt Cenis
FRANCE
TRIP REPORT
2026

Mount Olympus

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Day 1, June 29th- Arrival and transfer, Geneva –Val d’Isere

Julia and Oli were already in Geneva, and Bethan, Rosie and Theo were arriving on morning flights. Jacob was at Annecy train station, which was en route to Val d’Isere. We all made it without delays, and were soon driving through the wonderful rolling hills of this part of France, on a very warm and sunny day. We passed the beautiful Lake Annecy and in a few hours drew close to the famous winter ski resort of Val d’Isere. However, as soon as we approached the mountains and climbed the weather changed, and we arrived in the midst of a thunder storm! We all settled in and watched rain and thunder hoping for better weather the following day!

Day 2, June 30th- Tignes

This tour is what we are calling an ACTIVE Tour, designed to have full days hiking and botanising in the field, and this first day would be one of the longest- not particularly challenging, but we would walk from Val d’Isere to Tignes and back. Of course the main problem was flowers...!

It seemed that each day the weather was fine until around late afternoon when storms would come in, so we set off early in fine weather, and first stopped at a rock outcrop within the town, that was full of plants- Dianthus, Rhodiola, Thymes, *Silene nutans* and the mystery Umbel we later identified as *Siler montanum*, a particularly nice, almost succulent-leaved member of the Carrot Family, with the typical large flat white disc-like inflorescence resembling our cow parsley.

We found the start of the walk and straight away the group were aware of the richness of the area, with *Pyrola rotundifolia* wowing them with its nodding white wintergreen flowers. Next the Orchids started- Gymnedenia, probably *G. conopsea*, *G. odoratissima* and *G. densiflora*. A few of the smaller *Pseudorchis albida*, masses of an in bud Epipactis that we later found flowering and identified as *E. atroreubens*. Huge Twayblades, Neottea ovata were found, and it is the sheer volume of Orchids and Orchid Taxa here that is incredible, and it seems inevitable that it leads to the discovery of the largest-flowered Orchid in Europe, *Cypripedium calceolus*. Sadly however, it was a week/10 days past flowering, much the same as the Maritimes had been in May. Interesting by contrast that the Balkan Peninsula and areas further east have been two weeks behind this year.

The group weren’t worried about having missed the Lady’s Slipper though as there was so much else this area has to offer. *Linum narbonense*



is a lovely blue, and as we got to the cliffs *Saxifraga diapensioides* was found. Also just past flowering, but a botanical group just enjoyed its presence, and the rock hard domes of tiny grey leaves and old flowering stems were still enough to compare it to a somewhat similar Saxifrage that was in flower- in smaller numbers, the delicate *S. caesia* was like a pin cushion, with thin red stems arising from the tiny blue/grey leaved rosettes, and topped with large creamy white flowers; *S. diapensioides* has robust glandular hairy stems with multiple flowers per head- it was good to see the two species next to each other as they can be difficult to differentiate if not seen before.

A full list of species seen would be far too long so we’ll condense this report to the highlights...which are still difficult to choose from!

Next was a fantastic form of Edelweiss, *Leontopodium nivale* ssp. *alpinum* growing as a rock plant, very neat with intricately arranged flower heads- no one could dislike this specimen! Tucked in under the cliffs it was protected from any rain, so it was in perfect condition.

We then entered woodland, with *Clematis alpina* trailing from rocks and forming low clumps in mossy banks, mostly in seed but we were very lucky to get some flowers. Then some good woodland plants- *Polygonatum verticillatum*, another wintergreen, *Orthillia secunda*, *Paris quadrifolia*, Thalictrum, Geranium, and glades filled with *Phyteuma ovatum*.

Sadly, a new bridge has been constructed by the lake, firstly ruining the background views for our pictures of *Campanula cochlearifolia* and *Gypsophila repens*, and secondly as they’ve cut out a wide new track for the vehicles to construct/access this bridge- we all noted the density of species per square foot and found this piece of progress devastating...Twayblades clung on to the edges of the freshly cut highways, and there was an old, large and wonderful plant of the Burnt Orchid, *Neotinea ustulata* that may well not have escaped this progress, as it was not seen this time.

We walked up to Tignes through stunning meadows- at first daisies, Orchids, thistles and Phyteuma (amongst many others) then Trollius, Geranium, Sempervivum, more Orchids, Campanula and then one of the plants that was on Theo’s to-see list, and crikey what a specimen it was- *Lilium maritagon*, a better form it would be difficult to imagine, stout with stems half an inch thick, a foot and a half of flowers plus buds still to come all in perfect condition... he was very happy!



In an early season we were incredibly lucky to then find a snow patch-around this the turf was brown and we were able to turn the clock back to see some of the early snow-breakers that flower as soon as the snow melts- *Soldanella alpina*, *Gagea*, *Ranunculus pyrenaeus*, *Daphne mezereum* in flower (another from Theo's list!) and a (sadly) recently finished *Pulsatilla vernalis*, and then to Julia's delight, some Crocus- *C. albiflorus*.

After all those flowers we finally got to Tignes and had a late lunch, and as always, things had changed and the cable car that we normally caught was not running, and was replaced by a shuttle to the next village and a chair lift. This was going to take a while, and thunder was forecast to start in the next hour or so, so we made the difficult decision to go back the way we came via a slightly different path to get back to Val d'Iserre quicker and with shelter.

This path did give us *Saxifraga stellaris*, Pinguicula sp. and fantastic glades of *Lilium martagon*, once again to Theo's delight. It ended up being nice to go back past some of the things we'd already seen as it gave the opportunity to compare and understand the whole flora of that area a little better.

Frustratingly, the storm never came, but we did the right thing and enjoyed an evening recording a long plantlist!

Day 3, July 1st- Peak above Val d'Iserre

Today we left Val d'Iserre and headed to the region of Mt Cenis, but on the way stopped off at a few meadows and a high peak to see how some species grew differently depending on the altitude, and also the different species that occur depending on altitude. During this day we covered a large range of alpine habitats.

The first stop was not far out of the town, and we wandered up on to a bank which was being grazed, but still full of flowers. We saw three Allium species, the most prolific being the dark pink *A. sphaerocephalon*, with banks having thousands of plants. Jacob pointed out the strange parasitic dodder, a species of Cuscuta, which was forming fine red threads sprawling over a Clematis sp. Here too was *Rhodiola rosea*, *Scutellaria alpina*, *Dianthus sylvestris*, *Siler montanum*, a Bupleurum sp, Sempervivum sp, *Saxifraga paniculata*, Linaria vulgaris and many more!

We moved on only to stop a minute later to photograph many Gymndae-
nia and the hundreds of *Dactylorhiza majalis* in the damp verges. *Neottia ovata* was also here, and we were really impressed by the flowers on the other side of the road- the pinks, yellows and whites of Epilobium, Verbascum, Composites and Umbels, really quite a dazzling sight.



Geum reptans

We then went higher, and it wasn't long before we stopped to photograph the first *Campanula barabata*, the lovely large, drooping, hairy and pale blue bells of this species making it particularly photogenic. Of course there are other things always found once you stop, and unexpected plants of note were the tiny *Androsace obtusiloba*, Coelglossum (now Dactylorhiza...) viride, and the smaller Wintergreen than the ones previously seen, *Pyrola minor*, growing a lot higher here and in open turf as opposed to the *P. rotundifolia* we saw growing in rocky woodland.

A little higher and we saw snow, so once again had to pull over and noted *Bartsia alpina*, *Saxifraga androsacea*, our first *Aster alpinus*, *Erigeron uniflorus* and a new Gentian for us- the yellow *G. burseri*.

Then we went up and it was agreed we wouldn't stop again until we got to the top! We arrived and it was incredibly windy, as it often can be here. The weather was clear but there were clouds around and it looked like there was a storm in the Val d'Iserre. As we had some time here, we got the book out to ID our first sighting. It can get very boring when the guide just shouts out the names (if they know them...!) and somewhat defeats the purpose of a botanising trip.

This was a particularly nice and choice plant to start with, and we first noted its pink four-petalled flowers, taking us in the ball park of the Crucifer/Cress/Brassica Family. The various illustrations were scanned until it was narrowed down, and the plant description and distribution checked out for Petrocallis pyrenaiaca. And in fine form it was, masses around, and with its lovely honey scent. A very nice and garden worthy alpine. Nearby was a similar looking plant but with white flowers-what could it be?! After a little scanning, the description was read again and it was noted that 'rarely white' forms of *P. pyrenaiaca* were around, so we were particularly delighted with this find.

Next plant- a yellow flowered plant with coarse green leaves and long red runners. The new Chris Grey-Wilson doesn't seem to have the flower key at the front, but the older book does, so it was decided on Rosacea. The same process was followed, and this is a particularly good plant to key out, as there are two similar species, and the runners are only present in one (the seed heads are also very characteristic between the two species, and this is mentioned in the new CGW book), which makes it quite easy to tell the two apart. It was of course that wonderful plant of high altitudes, *Geum reptans*.



Petrocallis pyrenaiaca

Masses of plants were here, a lot having a similar habit- low growing mats with small leaves covered with unproportionally large flowers- just the way we like them! We were around 2800m here, so these were indeed high altitude alpine. *Silene acaulis*, *Saxifraga exerata* ssp. *exerata*, *S. oppositifolia* and *Gentiana schleicheri* were all here.

We went a little higher and *Ranunculus glacialis* appeared, wonderful fried-egg like flowers, their yellow sexy bits and pure white petals that often fade to crimson contrasting perfectly. A little higher and the mats of white and pink *Androsace alpina* start, then a gorgeous little blue jewel... Theo got the book out and gave us *Campanula cenisia*, a wonderful plant of these hills, with very neat mats of lime-green rosettes, and sky-blue starry flowers, and a particularly nice thing about this plant- the buds are also very attractive, and the best photographs of it are often with half the plant in flower and half in bud.

We climbed a little further, but the wind had picked up and the rain turned to sleet- behind us the storm blocked the views, so we turned back and got down very quickly, our faces lashed by the gale! We sheltered for a while whilst looking at more plants, then after a few minutes the storm cleared, the clouds parted, and we decided to give the peak another go.

More of the same plants followed from where we had abandoned the track before, and the group scrambled and climbed right to the top, where a special plant was waiting for us. Although there was hardly any there and it's tiny, Bethan managed to find one wedged in fissures just beneath the peak- *Androsace pubescens*. Sadly a week past flowering, but a great thing to see in the wild.

We got back down and continued our journey to the next destination, Val Cenis, but there were of course a few stops first! The first was for more *Ranunculus glacialis* growing in very damp ground (water was running across the surface) in large numbers, some wonderful plants here. More Ranunculaceae- *R. pyrenaicus* turning the turf white, and *Anemone baldensis*. Also here with the snow not long gone we found good examples of the little *Primula farinosa*.

A little lower, and more hollows in shaded spots gave us Trumpet Gentian, mostly closed up as it was a chilly afternoon. Here too was *Pulsatilla alpina*, still in flower- we had seen lots in seed that were well over, so it was again important to note that in areas where the snow had not



Saxifraga valdensis

long gone we could turn back time. Julia was particularly interested in seeing this plant after Farrer's lengthy and luscious praise (then *Anemone alpina*) in Among The Hills.

We eventually got to Val Cenis and settled in to our rooms before the next day's flower hunting.

Day 4 July 2nd- Mt Cenis Pt1

Mt Cenis is a destination long-visited by the AGS, no doubt inspired by the writing of Reginald Farrer in Among The Hills, as were a few members of the group. It was also one of the destinations visited by Oli the tour leader as a Merlin on an AGS Tour led by Michael Upward and Sally Petitt, so this was set to be an exciting day. The day dawned brightly, and we ascended to the heaven of Lac du Mt Cenis, an alpine lake beautifully suspended high above the clouds nestled in majestic hills and snow-capped peaks.

This day we were going to explore the slopes, screes and cliffs directly above the lake. There are certain plants that occur on one side, then different ones on the other! The first plant of great interest we saw was the variable *Dianthus pavonius*, often characterised (though not always) by the biscuit coloured reverse of its petals. There are so many forms here- black eyed, white eyed, green eyed, squat forms, tall forms, and soft pinks through to neon magentas, it's a wonderful thing. Also starting to come out here was the other dazzling pink of the area, the ornate crowns of *Centaurea uniflora* arising from bristly black buds and held beautifully above neat felty grey leaves.

More *Aster alpinus*, in purple, pink and sometimes white. We also found a semi-double form. A new Orchid appeared, the Black Vanilla Orchid, who's name seems to be in constant flux- *Nigritella/Gymnadenia nigra* and/or any of its new species/subspecies/synonyms. It is a lovely little thing that smells intensely of vanilla and is always a pleasure to see, whatever its latest name is! There was also the odd Frog Orchid hopping around here too.

Then another new plant for the tour spotted and identified by Jacob; the silvery-grey leaves and golden flowers of *Senecio incanus*.

Sempervivum were flowering away in the low alpine turf, then we got to scress, and in the rocks looked at the tiny Willows we'd been seeing. The essential dwarf garden willow, *Salix reticulata*, the Net-leaved Willow was forming large mats here and variable. Another good garden species, the tiny-leaved *Salix serpyllifolia* also formed large mats, and hugged the boulders, its little trunks



Lilium martagon

sometimes showing through, and we wondered how old some of these miniature trees must be. A third species, the slightly bigger leaved *S. herbacea*. There were also at least another three species in this area alone, in addition to all the others we'd seen and not identified on the trip. A shoulder of scree gave us more of one of the plants you'd hope to see in the Mt Cenis area (as Farrer pointed out- there is no actual 'Mt Cenis' itself!) *Campanula cenisia*, then scrambling through the screes a little further on the other- the neat and sweetly scented *Viola cenisia*. Neither of these are confined to this area/range, but they are particularly abundant here.

We stopped by a small lake for lunch, then went a little higher where the snow had only recently gone to tick off another few species- good flowering plants of *Saxifraga oppositifolia* (specimens previously seen were almost over), the flavouring for a new drink some of the tour members were getting in to, Artemisia genepi, and the sweet smelling Brassica, *Thlaspi rotundifolium*.

We then set off for the other side of the basin to see a different range of plants, in particular we were looking for a very rare Saxifrage. On the way down we saw lots more Viola cenisia, and then as if a line were drawn, Edelweiss started up in as greater number as any of us had ever seen, suggesting a geological change here. The huge flowered *Campanula alpestris* (allionii) also suddenly appeared, who sadly had a poor reception- Bethan said 'is that it?!' In her defence, the first few specimens weren't as impressive as they could be, but later we found some huge purple bells that really were wow plants.

We scrambled across screes to the basal cliffs at the top of them, and searched the steep shady ledges for the Saxifrage. After an hour or so the first plants were spotted- it was the very scarce and difficult to find *Saxifraga valdensis*, the smallest member of the Silver/Encrusted Saxifrages, Section ligulatae. These poor plants..... to this one Rosie remarked 'what, that ridiculous thing?!' However, once she gave it a closer look I think she too fell in love with it.

This species is said to be endemic to the area (here probably at its northern limit, usually found in the Cottian Alps proper further south), so it was great to add a plant this special to the list.

Anyway, with that one crossed off we headed back down to base for a very well deserved beer!



Crocus albiflorus

Day 5, July 3rd- Mt Cenis Pt2

Fine weather on this morning as we set off to hike up the other side of the lake. As we turned off the main road we were surrounded by magnificent meadows that got richer the longer you looked at them. In the morning we passed them and would inspect them more closely at the end of the day- the last Campanula species we were after had been spotted in there!

The road wiggled and wound gradually higher through beautiful alpine meadows, the species changing as we gained altitude. The road is now blocked off for vehicles slightly lower down before the track starts, so we parked up and started our day's walk. The path rose gently, and we walked through pasture where we spotted the tiny *Gentiana nivalis*. Julia had on her list Saponaria lutea, which we previously had not noted here, but once we were looking for it we found it very quickly. Farrer is of course rather rude about this plant, but it is a rather nice thing, although its 'straw-coloured flowers' do tend to pale a little in comparison to some of its bright pink-flowered cousins.

Julia's 'to-see' list is really worth a mention, because as referencing Farrer's list of plants for the area, she also is head gardener of Farrer's travel partner's garden, the great E.A Bowles. She has access to letters and records of their trips, including of course plants seen, so it was really fascinating being accompanied by these two lists that had been compiled around a hundred years ago by two such iconic plantsmen.

Fortunately we were also able to tick off another species from the list at this location- long since out of flower but recognisable to the conspicuous orangey-red edge (formed by little red dots visible through a hand lens), to its dark green leaves Primula pedemontana.

The path sides were rich with flowers- Centaurea, Dianthus, Helianthemum, *Campanula barbata*, the odd *Lilium martagon* and once again masses of Gymnadenia and the Black Vanilla Orchid...I'll just stick with the common name to avoid conflict.

This is one of Farrer's disguised walks (the reason for him disguising it will soon be disclosed) and we head for his 'false pass', and once there discover the 'frozen lake'. At the other end of this are *Ranunculus glacialis* by the million, the plants here not as squat and fried-egg like



Viola cenisia

as the previous plants seen, and tending here to be more pink and crimson, but this many was a sight to see. The scree turned back to turf further along the path, and here patches of *Viola* appeared in violet, yellow and white, then patches of *Gentiana verna*, and perhaps the plant of the day (up against stiff competition) was a pure white *G. verna* spotted by Jacob just before Theo was about to tread on it! It was so unexpected, and the turf so full of flowers one couldn't but help tread on something, but this was a good save!

We continued up to the pass and the Italian border for one special plant. We came across Chamois and their young, and Theo explored the old war fortress and discovered a family of them living in there, and got possibly the best pic of the tour!

We wandered around the pass, and Theo also found a very faded *Primula latifolia* (another from Julia's list) just clinging on to the colour of its fading flowers, then we got up to the highest point, and after much exploring Julia found the exquisite furry rosettes and little azure flowers that only belong to one plant- The King Of The Alps, *Eritrichium nanum*.

The group was informed by the leader (who of course is writing this report) that this was a true alpine, only occurring from 2500m, but here we were in fact at 2400m...interesting in such times. In my defence the old CGW book says 2500m...the new one says 2200m.

Thrilled to have ticked the last and possibly one of the most important species off the list, we headed back down, very happy and full of botany.

Let's take a quick look at this point, near the end of the trip, to think about some of the important botanical differences in each day, and species of interest not found on other days...

On Day 1, although gone over, *Cypripedium calceolus* was noted and was not seen after, as well as *Clematis alpina*, *Pyrola rotundifolia* and *Neotinea ustulata*. Not of course that they weren't necessarily present in the other areas.

The second day gave us *Pyrola minor*, *Androsace alpina* and *A. pubescens*, and although *A. pubescens* had been previously spotted at the first location of Mt Cenis it was not found on this trip.

The third day of course delivered *Saxifraga valdensis*, but also *Campanula alpestris* and *Viola cenisia*, absent from all other days.

This final day we saw Primulas *P. latifolia* and *P. pedemontana*, *Saponaria lutea*, and the *Eritrichium*. As the crow flies these sites are very close togeth-



Primula farinosa

er, also within the same chain of peaks, so it's interesting to note the diversity of this part of the world, and also the rarity of species when they do occur- you have to know where to look!

Anyway, on the way back we stopped to botanise, and after seeing some great *Saxifraga diapensioides* plants a week or so past flowering growing in the very calcareous rocks, the group could no longer resist the crystal clear streams that ran through this valley down to the lake so they all had a dip!

Meanwhile *Gentianella campestris* was spotted, we photographed it and made our way sadly to the last botanical stop of the tour.

The meadows immediately above the lake were steep and rammed with flowers and species. Tall and bold forms of our missing *Campanula*, the lavender-coloured spike of *C. spicata* were found, photographed and worshipped, along with *C. rhomboidialis*. There were *Epilobium angustifolium*, *Lilium martagon* and many others. Among this kaleidoscope of blooms Jacob somehow managed to pick out some lovely examples of another nice carrot, *Astrantia major*, a great find and nice way to round up the trip.

We headed back down to base and all met up for a last meal and plant list, which we only made to about halfway! With a suitable amount of flora and exploring we all retired for the departure the following day.

Day 6, July 4th- Return to Geneva for departure

This was maybe the best day of all, clear and bright- typical, but a good day to fly! Jacob had a train from Modane at 8.30, then we drove up through beautiful scenery including the Massif de Chartreuse (famous of course for another drink some were becoming fond of, and rightly so) and Aix-les-Bains, back through warm rolling hills where the air smelt fresh and clean, it really is a lovely part of the world. Everyone caught their flights without issue.

We look forward to running the tour again next year.



Saxifraga oppositifolia

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