



SOMETHING  
SPECIAL



*Campanula macrostyla*

Every so often there's a plant that takes your breath away, especially if it is one you've sought for a long time. It becomes almost mythical because you never seem to find it - and then there it is! I had actually gone off this day in search of something quite different, and also wonderful - *Rhaponticoides hierroi* a highly localised endemic found in just one valley. Arriving at the location I was stunned to find the locals had harvested all the ripe flowerheads. The only specimen I could find was perched above a quarry and impossible to reach - hence it was still there. It's much smaller spiny relative *Centaurea solstitialis* was there, but didn't quite match its bigger cousin. We actually have a *Rhaponticoides* flowering in our garden, a gift from the Istanbul botanic garden a few years ago and this year it finally flowered, wonderful big heads of creamy yellow. Naturally, I wanted to see it in the wild and the type location was just an hour from our Antalya home.

So you can imagine my disappointment when I found them all neatly cut off. Undeterred I set off in search of unmolested plants but suddenly rounding a bend on a dirt road this amazing plant presented itself instead. It was





*Campanula macrostyla*, one of the most remarkable members of a genus (and family - Campanulaceae) that contains many beautiful plants. I had set off early and the light was still in my favour, giving the outsize goblets glowing backlight. The best colony also grew within a stand of steely-blue *Echinops spinosissima*, which only added to the richness of the display as the *Campanula* grew through the spiny leaves of the *Echinops*. The long styles that project from the flowers eventually open and peel back. At one point a large Cardinal butterfly landed in one and was probing for nectar. I've seen butterflies pollinating some turk's-cap lilies before and suspect they are also the main pollinator of these remarkable flowers too. Elsewhere, I found see many more mingled among stands of *Salvia sclarea* and drying grasses.

As for *Rhaponticoides hierroi*, the reason this post is later than normal is I decided to return a week later and see if some of those in bud had come into flower. This time I took back-up - my elder son, Merlin, who unlike his linguistically-challenged father speaks fluent Turkish. And it paid off handsomely. We were looking around the field edges when a friendly old man started chatting to us (well Merlin at least) and we asked him if he knew of the flowers. He did and then told us this rare plant was harvested and the flowers sent to a lady in Izmir to be sold as dried flowers! A tragic waste of a globally rare plant. We intend to look into this matter further, but in the meantime the man also told us of a second location a few minutes drive away.

When I set off in search of plants I often imagine the perfect setting with stands of perfect flowers. So rarely does reality match this imagining. Today it did. Tucked behind an old stone house was a magnificent small meadow with hundreds of tall stems topped by big creamy-yellow mops - *Rhaponticum hieroi* in perfection. Merlin had been as patient as a (nearly) ten-year-old can and now it was time to drive back for a much needed late breakfast of honey pancakes. I'm not sure if dad's crazy plant-hunting has rubbed off on him yet, but I wouldn't have had this success without him.

Thanks Merlin!



Merlin with *Rhaponticoides hierroi*

