The wild flowers of Sicily

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It had to be the most unpromising bit of landscape I'd ever seen. The entire bay – literally – was rimmed with oil refineries, tanker loading bays, incomprehensible tangles of pipework and steel, red-and-white striped chimneys. It was a completely trashed, industrialised catastrophe somewhere between Syracuse and Augusta, on the east coast of Sicily, looking out across the Mediterranean.

But my husband had dragged me here. He is obsessed with Odysseus, and this is one of the places where the Greeks first set up shop in Sicily 3,500 years ago. He promised me it would be marvellous and atmospheric, but the only atmosphere I was getting was oil fumes occasionally wafting across from the industrial nightmare on every horizon.

A pleasant surprise

Then I started to walk out towards the point. On either side of the track emerged one of the most abundant and glorious gatherings of spring flowers that I've ever seen. That's Sicily for you – an appallingly managed and largely wrecked landscape, sheltering in its nooks and crannies all the riches of Mediterranean flora you might ever dream of. The building boom in the past 20 years – inextricably linked with the ever-present Mafia – has all but ruined the place, but in the leftover spaces one glimpses the naturally rich Arcadia that Sicily once was.

On the Odysseus peninsula, called Thapsos by the ancient Greeks and now called Penisola Magnisi, raspberry-coloured sedum lined the limestone tops, but in lusher, more sheltered places, there were collapsing rusty wire enclosures frothing with plants. Borage was everywhere, its stems and buds creating a purple-pink haze, studded with blue star flowers that were just beginning to emerge. Surging out through the borage was a wonderful, tall purple viper's bugloss – Echium lycopsis (syn. E. plantagineum).

Echiums, in general, flower for months, and this is the best and richest colour form I've seen. There were bright white patches of lace – a delicate umbellifer, closely related to Orlaya grandiflora (Tordylium apulum) – and waves of the Mediterranean equivalent of our tufted vetch (Vicia dasycarpa ) with a delicate pea (Pisum elatius) using it as a climbing-frame.

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The true wild sweet pea was here (usually sold as Lathyrus odoratus 'Matucana'), but not quite in flower – it was from Sicily that this first came (read more about the sweet pea story) – yet I kept catching wafts of a delicious honey scent as I walked further towards the tip of the peninsula, away from industrial hell. I finally pinned this down not to the naturalised mimosa trees (here a non-scented species, Acacia longifolia) but to sweet alyssum (Lobularia maritima), which many of us grow in our gardens for its scent. I have never given this white, cabbage-flowered plant a second look, but here just one clump growing out of barren rock was filling an area twice the size of a tennis court with a wonderful and powerful fragrance.

There were patches of sun spurge (Euphorbia helioscopia), brilliant pink carpets of the mini Mediterranean campion, Silene colorata, thicker on the stony ground than anything else, and banks of orange calendulas – a pretty, vibrant tangerine form. There were great drifts of the yellow annual corn marigold (Chrysanthemum coronarium discolor) with a splash of a garden escapee, purple perennial stock and deep red sainfoin (Hedysarum coronarium) in among them, filled in with the lovely rabbit's tail grass (Lagurus ovatus) to
complete the colour-studded floor.

Classical beauty

From this one walk alone, I had discovered a good list of things that I wanted to sow or grow when I got back to my own garden, but drive around any bit of the island and you'll get inspiration for more. Walk through the ruined temple-churches in Ortigia and you'll find walls covered in elegant spires of the cream wild snapdragon (Antirrhinum latifolium). In Noto Antica, the city ruined by the devastating earthquake of 1693, Teucrium fruticans, the elegant silvery grey-leaved shrub with very pale blue, heavily lipped flowers, was growing all over the limestone ruins and cliffs in early April. It mingled with bosoms of rosemary and rue, giant fennel (Ferula communis) and the soft mauve sage Salvia triloba.

Exquisite natural mini terraces were packed with orchids, growing dense and glamorous through the grass. On one, we found four different ‘insect orchids’, all in the genus Ophrys, the flowers of which mimic insects. There was a straightforward pink and brown bee orchid (Ophrys apifera) just coming into flower with several offspring all around it, and two different subspecies of early spider orchid (O. sphegodes). One was much like our native, with green petals and calyx around the central brown insect-like boss, the other with slim, elongated petals like a super-refined and even more beautiful form. The fourth was a shorter, squatter orchid, with a glamorous acid-green rim to its lip (Ophrys lutea lutea).

In Britain I would travel hundreds of miles to find even one of these orchids, but here there were four species popping up within a few feet. There were sprinklings of the bright magenta wild gladiolus (Gladiolus communis) and the odd tuft of grape hyacinth (Muscari comosum) with acid-green clouds of Smyrnium perfoliatum. On one wide terrace at the entrance there was the greater quaking grass in swaths, but nothing else on show when we arrived. But by the time we left in the mid afternoon, the whole shelf had turned blue-mauve with Iris sibirica, the perfect miniature iris, which opens only briefly in the afternoon.

The soil everywhere here is so richly thick with seed that wild flowers like these are commonplace, and few of the Sicilians walking past gave them a second look.

Signature of Sicily

The final place where we saw jaw-dropping wild flowers living cheek by jowl with devastation – natural this time, not man-made – was on the southern slopes of Mount Etna. For a 10-mile stretch of road, a 2002 lava flow had turned the landscape into Mars – a jet-black, chocolate Aero world, without a grass, a bird or an insect for mile after mile. The basalt buried whole buildings and expanses of forest in its momentous oozing, but sometimes the fingers petered out just in time to save a house or farm. We found a farmhouse surrounded by a terraced pear orchard in full blossom.

Under the trees, Anchusa hybrida was making its sapphire-blue haze below the silvery white branches of the fruit trees. The ground was studded with the odd clump of Hermodactylus tuberosa, the green and black-flowered widow iris and silvery-leaved wild lupin (Lupinus angustifolius). In the shadier edges of the plot, under a few sweet chestnut trees, were clutches of the rich magenta Roman dactylorhiza orchid, Dactylorhiza romana.

This seemed to be the signature of Sicily, an occasional paradise in what is being turned into hell. The tide of lava, concrete breeze blocks and plastic polytunnels seems set to continue to swallow it up. For flower lovers, the sooner you visit, the better.

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