

## What is a Meeting of The Fritillaria Group Like?

Suppose you were to sit during a lunch break listening to two of the most distinguished of botanists in the UK conversing about collecting and measuring the calorific value of nectar from flowers and the mating systems within different species and genera? You would be hearing about some of the most fundamental aspects of biology; the pollination of flowers, the mechanisms of change and evolution, the simple beauty and marvel of the world of plants. The two botanists are Emeritus Professor John Richards and Dr Martyn Rix, and the meeting that of the Fritillaria Group held at Birmingham Botanic Garden in autumn 2018. The subject, the 'Fritillarias of Greece and the Aegean'.

This is an example of a meeting arranged for keen and perceptive gardeners who belong to specialist gardening societies, which I will return to below. Another is the meeting held earlier in autumn in Norwich by the Norfolk Alpine Garden Society with Professor David Rankin speaking on searching for an elusive *Primula* in China, and Razvan Chisu on the botanical wonders of his native Romania, along with the excitement of gardening with them.

Here we have the very basis of gardening; the study and detail of the botanical world and cultivation of plants. And yet... And yet in both cases the societies - in the first case the relatively small and perhaps rarified Fritillaria Group, and in the second, the larger but definitely non-mainstream Alpine Garden Society - are little known in the wider contexts of UK gardening. This will hardly be a surprise you might say, but think of those fundamental aspects of biology and botany and how they make the very foundations of gardens. So for those not aware of the meetings of the Fritillaria Group here is a short synopsis of what you missed.

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John Richards opened the meeting using fritillarias as an excuse to show many more associated plants as well in 'Some Greek Fritillarias and Other Hellenic Stars'. In fact he could have given his talk on Fritillary butterflies of which he showed a fine composite picture of at the beginning of his talk. For the viewer in the audience with much more limited knowledge of the Greek flora and its native fritillarias the detailed way in which both John and later speakers described the distribution and habitats of different species, and their personal perceptions of them, captured a dynamic sense of botany, ecology and evolution

in action, and above all, variation. *Fritillaria mutabilis* exemplifies this in its very name, and in his talk later Robert Wallis came back to this showing very variable populations with similarities to both *F. thessala* and *F. graeca*.

For anyone tempted to grow these plants - and the genus has that subtle appeal that grows on the plantsman - it was especially interesting to see the associated plants that John described in different habitats; *Ebenus cretica* growing with *F. messanensis* on steep limestone banks in Crete; *Tulipa goulimy* on the dry and barren Mani Peninsula along with *F. davisii*; and in shallow dolines in the Northern Peloponnese *F. mutabilis* growing with the rare *Adonis cyllenea* and endangered *Biebersteinia orphanidis* (which is otherwise only known 1200km away in Anatolia). Whether or not *ex situ* cultivation of plants within gardens has the capacity to ensure regeneration of wild populations of plants under threat, greater awareness of their natural ecological communities can aid in their cultivation and potential for this to occur. John showed a dark, almost black, form of *F. graeca* growing at Keratea, south-east of Athens, possibly illustrating introgression with *F. obliqua*. Most fascinating of all, notably in view of its namesake who spoke later, was to see colonies of the 'tall and elegant' yellow *F. rixii* growing in thinly grassed serpentinite shales with pines and junipers and *Cyclamen graecum*; a mimic for the grassland buttercups, as Martyn agreed. And the close, possibly conspecific *F. euboica*, only half the height and with shorter and wider yellow bells - though it would take a brave botanist to merge them!

There were intriguing asides such as the fine autumn *Crocus speciosus* which doesn't occur again until 500km further east in Turkey; *Daphne blagayana* growing high up in meadows with *C. veluchensis*; and the wonderfully condensed form of *Dianthus myrtinervis* subsp. *caespitosus*. For the garden these plants are both beautiful and desirable, but to share the experience of someone who has studied them so closely and perceptively in the wild gives a whole new and enlightened way of viewing them and a strong urge to visit Greece and see them for yourself.

*Fritillaria* is of course close to the genus *Lilium* botanically, if lacking in the horticultural popularity of its more familiar cousin, and Duncan Coombes (a member of the Lily Group) took a sideways look at the latter in Greece along with the plants growing with them. It was interesting to see the vivid red *L. chalcedonicum*, which grows well in our dry Kentish garden, in its natural habitat often amongst quite dense vegetation on the edge of woodland. Other lilies he mentioned included the very dark form of *L. martagon*, subsp. *cattaniae*, *L.*

*albanicum*, and the rare and elusive *L. rhodopeum*. Along the way was a wonderfully photogenic specimen of *Globularia cordifolia*, the striking hawthorn *Crateagus orientalis* with silvery leaves, some magnificent scenery and 1000-year-old Frescoes. The close relationship between these two genera, *Fritillaria* and *Lilium*, and common interests in both, suggests that future meetings may fruitfully explore the cultivation of each in our gardens.

Probably no two people know more about the genus *Fritillaria* than Martyn Rix and Robert Wallis and it was a great privilege to hear both of them speak, Martyn on the 'Small Flowered Fritillarias of Greece', which spanned across the Aegean from close to the coast of Turkey, and Robert with the provocatively titled 'Fritillarias of Greece, but What Are They?', which captured some of the complexity and subjectivity in defining the nature of plants. As the two lead authors of the forthcoming and long awaited monograph on the Genus *Fritillaria*, their talks about just one centre of diversity of the genus emphasised how botanical exploration is as much a personal quest as a scientific one, and how gardening relates to the wider world where plants form communities in often harsh and hostile landscapes. These are mostly plants from very different situations than found in UK gardens but they inspire the gardener to experiment and test limits and by doing so really bring that wider world into the garden in unique ways. Martyn showed dry and arid landscapes populated with *Euphorbia rigida*, where fritillarias also grow, and the euphorbia does grow successfully in our south-east garden which hints that more fritillarias may do so too. The black flowered *F. tuntasia*, which he illustrated, once grew in a gritty scree with other bulbs, obtained from Beth Chatto many years ago, and would be good to try again. Robert showed the woodland margin species *F. pontica* which will naturalise in the garden, and juxtaposed it with an example of a scene at Pisoderi carpeted with *Anemone nemorosa*, just like a British ancient woodland. He then journeyed south to hotter, drier and more typically Mediterranean environments following the trend of 'Little Brown Bells' as he went: *F. pontica*, *F. gussichiae*, *F. thessala*, *F. mutabilis*, *F. graeca*, *F. rhodocanakis*, *F. spetsiotica*, *F. argolica*, *F. montana*, *F. epirotica*, *F. davisii*... a litany of names that the gardener may view only cursorily in nursery lists or photographs, but given much more meaning and value by placing them in their natural environment.

Perhaps most lovely of all, because of their rather glowing and eye-catching colour, are the yellow species *F. euboica* and *F. rixii*, and the newly described *F. phitosia*, and the the Plant of the Day - shown by Martyn - was a putative hybrid between *F. graeca* and *F. euboica* with broad bells of yellow, striped and flushed with red. For the garden there is that

dream of a dry meadow and scree dotted with some of these flowers of Greece! For the plantsman and botanist there is that greater understanding of the natural world and how our gardens can relate to this.