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FT Weekend
26 November/27 November 2016

**House&Home**

One of the world's most famous types of honey comes from Mount Hymetta, scarcely three miles from the centre of busy Athens. Myths and poets celebrated it for almost 1,000 years, but nowadays outsiders might regard it as a fictional mirage. Modern Athens has been notorious for polluted air and urban overcrowding. In antiquity bees were said to have brought honey from Hymetta to the lips of the young Pluto. Nowadays, they would struggle to find their way in the philosopher's Academy across multi-track highways and the concrete campus of the university at the foot of its hill. Ancient Timon, that hater of mankind, is said to have withdrawn to a cave on Hymetta in disgust at his fellow citizens. He had lavished his personal fortune on them all and had had a doctor's ultimate nightmare, not a word of thanks. The idea that anyone would there spend a modern fortune on Hymetta food would strike Timon as preposterous.

In fact, Mount Hymetta is a remarkable tale of modern regeneration and replanting, powered by private donations. On its slopes there is even a botanical garden, my recent destination with members of the Mediterranean Garden Society, a worldwide group which I recommended to readers who have a garden in the Med's dry climate and wish to grow plants that are not just a desperate echo of Britain but are at home in local conditions (for details of membership see [mediterraneangardensociety.org](http://mediterraneangardensociety.org)). On Hymetta the Philodassiki Botanical Garden makes valiant use of a dry slope on the mountainside and shows hundreds of plants native to Greece and the Aegean islands. As I climbed along its well-planned paths, I saw silver- and grey-leaved plants to which I could not give just a firm Latin name. I lamented my ignorance in front of Greek types of localised oaks and junipers which I mistook for peculiar types of cedar or alders with silvery leaves.

In 1943, at the end of the war, Hymetta's slopes had been devastated by fighting and by the Athenians' desperate stripping of its woods, one of their only accessible sources of fuel. The mountain became an ecological wreck. A Union of Friends of the Forest was formed to address the catastrophe and contrived to plant about 3m trees over the following three decades, many of which were raised in a nursery dedicated to their supply. At the centre of the plan lay the 11th-century monastery of



Philodassiki Botanical Garden near Athens

## On an upward slope

This botanical garden on a Greek mountain is a remarkable tale of regeneration



Crocus niveus



Strobilium luteum



Tulipa saxatilis



Crocus pallasi

...Greek germanders and a whole range of grey-leaved Greek survivors which are unknown to Britain's RHS Plant Finder.

Greek flora is amazingly varied and far more diverse than is ever remarked by the great classical Greek poets of the past. They never zero in on the superb wild tulips, let alone the beautifully marbled leaves on wild Greek cyclamens. They were no help to me as I encountered the strikingly grey-leaved *Isatis caudata*, the whiter than white-leaved *Silvia caudiciflora*, the silvery *Asperula turgida* from the mountains of ancient Sparta and the Attic *Thymus parviflorus*, one of the local magnets for bees. Labels marked good clumps of the lovely Greek pennywort *Hydrocotyle*, which now flowers rarely in the garden. Other labels taught me that the excellent single red-flowered *Ferula peregrina* of our garden is a native, with a far deeper colour, of Epirus in the north-west delightfully huffed by the small evergreen leaves and yellowish underleaves of an oak from Cyprus called *Quercus ilex* which I did find on the hillside to the right which will cup over this year's exhausted autumn in my mind.

Between tree roots, strips and labels, some flowering clumps of yellow *Strobilium* were as ever a delight. This

Katariasi on a site of pre-Christian myth and oak. Under the direction of Eddy Argropoulos and others, Hymetta regained a canopy of trees, shrubs and aromatic plants which brought back bees and enabled its honey to return to life.

The replanting was underpinned by a gift from the Melas family of their personal business fortune, received in a way which Timon would have envied. In the past 60 years it has enabled a green forest to be re-established and the botanical garden at its centre to be planted and maintained. Between 1997 and 1999, a staff of five were deployed to lay out proper paths through the slopes, to replant the botanic area and to install an essential watering system, fed from tanks for rainwater on the site. At a cost of €200,000 the site was upgraded and now, in these years of crisis, an annual budget of €30,000 sustains a



**Robin Lane Fox**  
On gardens

yellow flowers of autumn is an essential bulb in English gardens, but near Athens it is an ultra-special sight. In Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus*, that wondrous play about irreplaceable heroism and old age which the master tragedian wrote in his eighties, the chorus, men from the Attic countryside, praise their land for its "gold-gleaming crocus", not the crocus, experts now believe, of our spring gardens but the golden crocus-like *Strobilium* of autumn, flowers of low altitude which were glowing round my feet. Beyond them, four crocuses were gleaming in an unorthodox way, not gold ones but like ones whose flowers were mixed with yellow and white, none other than *Crocus pallasi* whose name recalls the goddess Pallas Athena and which refuses to grow in English gardens because of the cool summer and winter damps. Small deity of Pallas's crocus paid floral tribute to their goddess within three miles of her Athenian acropolis. With the Sophoclean golden crocus they are the sight which will sustain me through England's un-Greek winter.

Private gifts and dedicated work have made this garden possible. During the years of post-war urban sprawl, not even existing in Athens has been heading for catastrophe. Hymetta is a model for givers who want to restore a landscape when the ravages of war reveal.

skierial staff a full-time gardener, the expert Nikos Pappas, with a part-time curator, Sophia Pitarachi, and a part-time systematic botanist. Volunteers come to help at a site which they love and admire. The garden also runs a small plant nursery with conspicuously well-grown stock in polythene pots. As a charity, it cannot sell these plants, but it opens on Saturday mornings and gives customers their pick of the stock in the hope of donations towards the garden's upkeep. More customers make a gift than not.

The rainfall on the mountain is minimal and tree roots and shrubs compete for water. The conditions are brutally Greek and so the approach has been to give Greek plants pride of place. The result is a garden without a single daily-flowered intruder from South Africa. Instead the beds are homes for Greek pines, Greek thymes, Greek marjoram,



ELYSIAN

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Μετά την επίσκεψή του με τα μέλη της Mediterranean Garden Society στον Βοτανικό Κήπο της Φιλο

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