



Mediterranean Garden Society
Peloponnese Branch AGM 31.03.25 - 07.04.25

THE THREE FINGERS TOUR



Introduction

The Peloponnese peninsula, separated from mainland Greece by the Corinth canal, is characterised by its mountainous interior and deeply indented coastline. Its highest peak, with an altitude of 2,407 metres, is in the Taygetos mountain range, which forms the spine of the Mani peninsula.

In common with most of Greece, the Peloponnese has no significant tradition of ornamental gardening, or garden design. The emphasis was always on subsistence gardening - the growing of fruit and vegetables for domestic use. Nevertheless we can benefit from the exceptional biodiversity, rich archaeological heritage, and extreme contrasts of its landscape, to view the flora as nature intended, in its natural habitat.

Early spring is arguably the best time of year botanically, when the hillsides are awash with colourful wildflowers, punctuated by acid green *Euphorbia* and splashes of *Anemone*. We will visit the three fingers of the southern Peloponnese, to explore sites of both horticultural and architectural interest, botanising among atmospheric ancient ruins colonised by chasmophytes, and invariably set in spectacular, rugged landscapes, which perfectly epitomise the principle of *genus loci*.



The peaks of the Taygetos mountain range, viewed from the outskirts of Kardamyli.

Trip summary

Day 1 Monday 31/03 - we travel by coach from central Athens, by way of the beautiful city of Nafplio, the first capital of modern Greece. We will explore Akronafplia, with its ruins dating from classical times, where we can expect to see *Anenome hortensis* ssp. *pavonina*. We then spend some free time in the old town of Nafplio, before traveling on to Sparta, our base for the first night. Once we have checked into our hotel, we will visit the Museum of the Olive and Greek Olive Oil, which focuses on the culture, history and technology of olive and olive oil production in Greece, from prehistoric times to the early 20th century. The displays include working replicas of Prehistoric, Hellenistic and Byzantine olive presses and, planted in the courtyard, specimens of *Olea europaea* cultivars. In the evening we walk to a local taverna for our welcome dinner.

Day 2 Tuesday 01/04 - we explore the UNESCO World Heritage site of Mystras, the last centre of Byzantine learning and culture. Set on a steeply sloping site in a stunning landscape dominated by *Cupressus* and *Pinus*, the well preserved ruins are interspersed with myriad wildflowers such as *Himantoglossum robertianum*, *Ophrys sicula*, *Campanula topaliana* and *Cymbalaria microcalyx*, the latter endemic to S. Greece. We will picnic on the site, before making our way to Gythio, where we will explore the tiny islet of Kranai, connected to land by a short causeway. The islet is also known as Marathonisi (fennel island) because of the abundant *Ferula communis* that grow there. According to legend, Paris and Helen spent their first night on Kranai island, after eloping together. Our next two nights will be spent on the other side of the causeway, in the charming town of Gythio. Dinner will be at a nearby taverna.

Day 3 Wednesday 02/04 - We visit the fortress town of Monemvasia, one of the oldest continually inhabited fortified towns in Europe. We will walk up to the acropolis, where we can expect to find swathes of *Ferula communis*, *Cerintho retorta* and *Campanula* growing in the dry-stone walls. There will be free time to explore the lower town before moving on to the stunning natural 'fjord' and wetlands of Limni Gerakas, on the east coast of the Peloponnese. We will make our way up to ancient Zarax, via a track punctuated with *Moraea sisyrinchium* and *Serapias orientalis*. Once at the top we can explore the flora, and enjoy a picnic lunch, while taking in panoramic views of the coastline. Back in Gythio our evening meal will be 'mezedes' at a local taverna.

Day 4 Thursday 03/04 - we head south, along the Mani peninsula, to Cape Tainaro, one of the gates to the underworld, according to Greek mythology. It's unlikely we will encounter Charon, but if we are lucky we may spot *Tulipa goulimy* and *Fritillaria davisii*. Keen walkers may follow the track leading to the lighthouse at the tip of the peninsula where, standing at the most southerly point of mainland Greece, they can take in the endless expanse of blue, stretching all the way to north Africa. Others may prefer to explore the Roman mosaics, and visit the sanctuary of Poseidon. The really hardy may be tempted to swim from the small beach! The next stop is Areopoli, where we make our way through cobbled alleys for lunch in a traditional taverna, passing the square where the banner of the Greek Revolution was first raised, in 1821. From here we will head north to our base for the next four nights, the pretty seaside town of Kardamyli, mentioned by Homer in the Iliad, and one of the oldest settlements in the Peloponnese. It has spectacular views of the Taygetos mountains to the east, and the Bay of Messinia to the west.



Cypress trees overlooking the Viros Gorge, near Kardamyli

Day 5 Friday 04/04 - we explore the western finger, visiting Koroni and Methoni, once considered the 'chief eyes' of the ruling Venetian Republic, due to their strategic positions. The grounds of Methoni castle cover an area of 93 acres, where native planting is allowed free rein. Plants such as *Allium commutatum*, *Caparis spinosum* and *Phlomis fruticosa*, thriving among the ruins, are testament to the resilience of natives. At the southern tip stands Bourtzi - an octagonal tower surrounded by a moat, and accessed by bridge. The castle of Koroni, is the only castle in Greece which is still inhabited, and it's possible to roam among the houses, small gardens and cultivated fields. The pretty convent garden within the castle walls is lovingly tended by the few remaining nuns. An impressive specimen of *Brachychiton discolor* flourishes there, grown from seed gifted by a visitor long ago. Walking back down to the village for lunch at a seaside taverna, we can admire the flower filled streets and balconies.

Day 6 Saturday 05/04 - we visit two gardens near Kardamyli. The first, a water wise garden on a sunbaked hillside above the village, developed over the last 13 years using mediterranean natives. Those who opt to walk up to the garden should spot *Cyclamen rhodium* ssp. *peloponnesiacum* on the track. The second garden is the beautifully located property of the late writer and war hero, Sir Patrick Leigh Fermor, and his wife Joan, who bequeathed the house to the Benaki Museum. We will be able to enjoy a buffet lunch in the stunning setting of the garden, overlooking Kalamitsi Bay.

Day 7 Sunday 06/04 - on our final day, we will stroll through the flower-filled lanes of old Kardamyli, with its vernacular gardens, to the medieval fortified dwelling complex of the Mourtzinios clan, where we can view the workshops, war tower, family church of St. Spiridon and even the walled vegetable garden. Above the old olive press were the rooms in which the family resided. These have been restored, and converted into a unique meeting space which will be the venue for the highlight of our event - a talk by **Olivier Filippi**, the guru of mediterranean gardening, on the subject of **The Symbiosis of Flora and Wildlife in Drier Climates**. Following the talk we will walk through the village for our farewell lunch at a seaside taverna.

Day 8 Monday 07/04 - we travel back to central Athens, taking a break at the Corinth canal on route. Work on the canal, with a length of 6.4 kilometres, was begun under Emperor Nero in 67 AD, and completed in 1853.

Clothing & physical requirements

We will occasionally be walking on uneven, stony, tracks and paths which may be slippery if wet. There are no long walks, but some of them are uphill, and participants are expected to have a reasonable level of fitness, and agility. Sensible footwear is recommended, but not necessarily walking boots - trainers are fine. In early April the weather may be unsettled. The evenings may be cool and it's possible that we might have some rain, so a light waterproof is advisable, as is a light jacket.

Cancellation

The MGS reserves the right to cancel the AGM in the event of circumstances beyond its control.

Disclaimer

This programme is as complete as possible at the time of publication, but the cost and itinerary may be subject to changes. If you take part in a Mediterranean Garden Society event, you do so entirely at your own risk. Neither the Mediterranean Garden Society, nor the organisers and/or tour leaders of these events are in any way responsible for the safety of those taking part. The organisers reserve the right to make changes to the programme due to unforeseen circumstances and/or inclement weather.

Insurance

All participants are required to take out travel insurance for the duration of the tour, and will be asked to provide a valid policy number.