

**Plants and People on the Island of Corfu – An Ongoing Relationship:  
The traditional use of plants for food, medicine and support in everyday life.**

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Photo: View from Mount Pantokrator across the Ionian Sea and Albania

Photo Credit: Stamatis Koulouridis

## Acknowledgements

This work is dedicated to the local people of Corfu, the island that has been home to me for more than twenty years. I feel grateful to everyone who has shared with me aspects of their personal and family history which all together constitute an important part of the “spirit” of this land.

I would like to specifically thank:

Eleni Armeni, Iosifina Armeni, Spiros Ballis, Sia Banou, Eugenia Bekatorou, Natassa Chalikiopoulou, Roula Chirdari, Nitsa Dafni, Katerina Fakiola, Giannis Gasteratos, Eleni Iona, Eleni Kanta, Agathi Siroti Karavidi, Rozina Kardakari, Spiros Kitsios, Afroditis Kremmida, Joy Konstantis, Sophia Kontari, Anna Koskina, Eleni Koskina, Afroula Kourkoulou, Christodoulos and Katina Koulouridis, Anna Laurantou, Spiros Metallinos, Aristeia Metallinou, Spiridoula Metallinou, Alexis Methodios, Fotini Mikalef, Mary Mina, Dimitra Nalbanti, Eleni Neratzi, Spiros Nikopoulos, Spiros Priftis, Spiros Thimis, Mantalena Trianti, Christina Tsimiagkou, Eleni Tsimiagkou, Mary Varsaki, Nikos and Aggeliki Vassilakis, Nina Vital, Eugenia Vitouladiti, Adriani Vlachou, Eleni Vorou, Giorgos Zombos.

I am deeply grateful to my friend Maria Nikolouzou, a plant photographer who has done amazing work on and with the plants of Corfu and always generously gives me access to any photo I need for my work.

Last but not least, I must especially acknowledge the friends that became family to me, Maria Faita and Eleni Zombou, because without their ongoing love, help and support on many levels, I wouldn't have been able to come this far.



Photo: Maria Faita in her bookshop in Korakiana, where we have spent hours and hours trying to shape this work.



Photo: Eleni Zoubou with her *nona* (grandmother). Every one of these nonas (mine included) was a whole universe in a person. A whole world who, when they passed away, stopped manifesting in the earthly realm but continue living through the impact they had in shaping the future generation's lives.

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## 1. Introduction

There was a time, not so long ago, that most people living in the Corfiot countryside were able to identify a large number of plants growing around them. These plants constituted an integral part of their everyday life and they were widely used for food, medicine, clothing, cleaning, religious and spiritual purposes, etc. These skills have been in decline ever since Corfu started to become an internationally acclaimed tourist destination in the 70s. People abandoned the cultivation of the land, animal husbandry and fishing— a life close to nature – to become waiters, barmen and receptionists, tying their lives to the summer visitors. Fortunately, there are still some people who retain a great part of this knowledge – knowledge that is core to the Corfiot identity, that is part of what was, not too long ago, the mainstream culture that permitted people to live in harmony with their part of the world and the planet as a whole.

Life in the island's countryside was to a great extent formed by the relationship between plants and people, and in the past parents did their best to make sure that this bond would remain healthy and strong in each generation by teaching their children about plants from a very early age.

On their way to the fields or while taking care of the animals, parents shared stories about plants, tasting a wild green with the children while talking. Toxic or in any other way dangerous plants were the first to be taught. Most of the people brought up in this way know very well the plants they should be careful with, although the reason why is not always clear nowadays.

Life before tourism was hard and very much depended on wild nature. Peasants cultivated the land, working hard in the fields from early dawn to dusk, but food was always scarce. Peasants didn't own the land they worked on and the greater part of what they produced was taken by the landowner. Every member of the family who didn't work in the fields helped sustain the family by finding food and medicine in the wild.

Plant identification and the knowledge of how to use plants for food, medicine, clothing, cleaning, preserving food and many other uses were skills absolutely necessary to survival.

Things happened from time to time that people couldn't address by themselves. Women, especially grandmothers, were the people with the most herbal knowledge in the family. Women living close by used to visit each other in the evening, and while their hands were working on a shared project, they talked about their troubles and worries, seeking advice from the others. That was the time they shared their knowledge about healing plants and mushrooms growing around them and the way to use them therapeutically.

Other moments, the expertise of a specialized "healer" was needed. Healers were both men and women. Usually, being a healer wasn't a job. It was a talent and an inclination that people practiced together with their job or the housekeeping. Healers didn't ask for money but people always felt the urge to give something back. Things like eggs, poultry, wine. Whatever there was available!

A healer could be a grandmother who, while walking to the field, people stopped here and there to ask for advice. These persons really shared their talent and knowledge from the heart, without expecting anything in return, not even recognition or gratitude.

In most villages, there was a bone setter, an orthodox Christian priest who advised people on physical and spiritual issues, a midwife, a witch/wizard or trance medium and, sometimes, a doctor who had to use herbs out of necessity since medicine was mostly unavailable and/or an herbalist. All of these people had knowledge of herbal medicine to different degrees.

Looking back to the past, following the traces of whatever has survived from life before tourism in the memories of the people that were children at that time is my way to reconnect with the spirit of the island I feel to be my home, the wisdom of our ancestors, the power to overcome all the financial, political and spiritual challenges of our time by knowing who we are (our strengths and our weaknesses), the joy of living in harmony with nature and our small human community. That was a hard time but people used to dance and laugh and enjoy a life that felt precious! May we all be inspired to integrate these skills and wisdom into our modern lives, in the way that will best serve each one of us!

## 2. Focus of the Study and Research Methods

Five years ago, while I was waiting outside the community doctor's office with my father-in-law, who came to live with us after a big earthquake in our home island of Kefalonia destroyed their house, I had the chance to spend a few hours with the elderly villagers who were also waiting to see the local doctor. Out of nowhere, they started talking about a plant that, when used to rinse their mouth when they had a tooth ache, helped get rid of the bad tooth soon after. The tooth just fell out after a while and that was a great relief since there was no dentist they could pay a visit to. The herb was called by its local name, which was absolutely unknown to me. But that was the moment I decided to start writing down the traditional use of plants in Corfu.



Photo: Hellebore, *Helleborus cyclophyllus*. Thanks to this plant I committed to this work.

It wasn't an easy task! I don't come from Corfu and I don't have any elderly relatives here to ask. It took sometime before things started to fall into place. It was then that I realized that I had to earn my right of passage into people's memories and that lifelong devotion is required. Things take shape slowly over time, information unfolds and it gains meaning following my own change of knowledge, attitude, understanding, community sharing and community building. This is knowledge that people tend to protect and they don't share freely. It is a great moment when it happens. Sometimes local people respond to my request and other times they come looking for me because they have things they would like to share.

My aim is to bring together the information and write it down, so that it will be always freely available to anyone looking for it. Since I started this work, I have often been invited into schools all over the island to speak with the children about the traditional use of plants in Corfu and I am always happy to respond positively to these invitations.

At the beginning, it was only about medicinal plants. I started writing the stories down trying to find the plant behind the local name, trying to find out what is common and consistent in most stories and what is in agreement with western herbalism. What I am really looking for is if behind the medicinal uses of the plants, a consistent herbal healing tradition and a system of strategies and ideas can be traced. Unfortunately, this hasn't been possible so far.

Most of the herbal uses people shared with me belong to what is called "domestic medicine". This is a term I first met in Stephany Hoffelt's article "Domestic Medicine" (Plant Healer Magazine, Vol. V#III, summer 2015) and really helped me to organize my thoughts around the information I am gathering.

"Domestic Medicine is a term coined by Dr. William Buchan to describe autonomous self-care practices that occur in the home. Anthropologists sometimes define this as the popular health care culture. Popular health care refers to self-care or familial care practices informed by popular knowledge. Often knowledge of this nature is passed along by word-of-mouth – frequently as home remedies that are passed down through the generations."

This is exactly what the greater part of what I will describe is about. As we shall see, most of these practices are first aid remedies or remedies to relieve or prevent things. There are no remedies that can alter chronic health situations and there are no remedies that take constitution under consideration, as only the community's herbal healer had knowledge of these things.

This aspect of herbal medicine can possibly be found in the writings of the few herbal healers that lived in Corfu three generations ago and their work represents what Hoffelt describes as "folk herbalism", in which:

"[t]he folk health care culture is comprised of non-professional specialists such as lay midwives, folk herbalists or medicine men."

So far, I have come across two names. Both of them were farmers who served their communities with their skills. They never asked to be paid for their services, although people always felt the need to give back from what they had available.

Konstantinos Soupionis was a famous herbalist who lived in the south of Corfu in the village of Kato Garounas. People still speak of his amazing treatments and it is generally claimed that after he started practicing, the number of people with disabilities was drastically reduced in the south. It was quite common for local midwives to hurt the fragile baby's musculoskeletal system when things didn't proceed absolutely smoothly and he was the one that brought everything back into place after birth.

People used to call him *Kouzinias* which means “Kitchen Man”, which probably has to do with making medicine in the kitchen. He was the only person I know of so far that used to make salves, and since jars were not readily available at that time he poured the salves into nutshells instead and kept them wrapped in lemon or nut tree leaves.



Unlike most people in his time, he knew how to read and write. He had herbal books and used to write down his cases, healing protocols and recipes with ink he made himself by pressing olive oils or pokeweed fruits. Some of these writings have been collected by the University of Patras and some others are kept by his grandchildren. Unfortunately, no herbalist has ever seen them.

It is absolutely certain that he somehow assessed personal constitution and gave different treatments to different people for what is considered the same ailment in Western medicine.

He started practicing after he was released from prison, where he had been serving a sentence for political reasons in Ioannina, in the mainland. Ioannina is very close to Zagoria, a number of villages on the mountain of Pindos, famous for their traditional herbal medicine and the great number of herbs growing in the area. My guess is that he met one of the local healers (*Vikogiatros* – a medicine man from Vikos Gorge area) in prison and he learned from him. This is just an assumption for the moment.

Some time ago, I heard of another great herbalist who lived in the north, in the village of Pagoi, more or less at the same time as Kouzinias. His name was Xenophontas Lomis and he also used to write down his cases, healing protocols and recipes. His grandchildren claim this material is lost but nobody knows for sure. His son was a well-known herbalist too.

There is still much to be learned about these two men. Maybe in the future, maybe for someone else. The important thing is that an herbalist with a broad knowledge of different herbal healing systems will try to find the main ideas that drove their work. I am sure that it will happen when the time is right.

The third term that I will acknowledge from Stephany Hoffelt's work is the term "professional care". The term refers to doctors, and here we have the case of Masigka, the female doctor on the island of Paxos. Masigka was the third female doctor in Greece and although she could have had a great career in Athens or abroad, she returned to the island of Paxos to serve her community. She was the only doctor on the island from 1924 to 1968 and she had to rely on herbs since there was no other medicine available most of the time.

She used to teach people, especially the women, how to prepare herbal medicine for their families. Possibly, she also learned herbal remedies and recipes from her patients.

Sophia Kontari, a young lady who was brought up on the island remembers a bottle of marshmallow syrup for coughs that was on the kitchen table during the winter which her mother had learned how to make from Masigka.

According to Sophia: "My mother used to crush and grind marshmallow stems and leaves in the mortar for half an hour, till she had a good mucilaginous paste. She added some water to cover the paste and boiled it on a low heat for many hours (2-3 hours) until well reduced. She strained well, added some sugar to the liquid and boiled it again till she had a syrup. She kept the bottle on the table and gave us tablespoons when we had a cough. She learned that recipe from Masigka, our doctor."

This is the only syrup recipe I have found so far that produces a real syrup (not a thick tea), which can be preserved.



Photo: Marshmallow, *Althaea officinalis*

Unfortunately, the people that provide written information about Masigka's life are doctors who were not interesting in finding out more about the way she used herbs. There are still some of her patients alive and it is absolutely necessary that information should be gathered from what they still remember, as most of them are quite old.

The information on the use of healing plants at home that I have managed to gather so far is grouped into the following categories:

1. Herbs for Colds and Flu
2. Accidents
3. Personal Care and Beauty
4. Pain
5. Miscellaneous

For other uses of plants which came up in the interviews and attracted my interest, the information about them runs as follows:

1. Plants for Food: wild edible greens, mushrooms and fruits
2. Domestic Use
3. Plants Used in Religious Ceremonies
4. Plants in Family and Community Ceremonies

The majority of the information has been gathered by interviewing the locals, and many of these interviews, especially the most recent ones, were recorded and transcribed. Recordings started as a means of preserving people's words in the local dialect, something that unfortunately cannot be transmitted to a non-Greek reader.

Interviews were not structured. People could freely share what came to mind – whatever they wished. They were encouraged to speak about what was significant to them and this freedom occasionally revealed new areas of interest and topics that hadn't come up thus far.

There were no questionnaires or a checklist, just a loose framework to ensure all topics would be covered and that there would be flow in the conversation.

As more and more people that I didn't know personally started sharing their stories, I tried to make clear at the beginning who I was and what the purpose of the work was. Fortunately this is a relatively small island, and even people that didn't know me knew what it was all about before they decide to talk. I always asked if they wanted their name to be mentioned should I publicly use the information they gave me, and reassured them that all information would be handled with respect. There were no formal procedures, as something like this would be considered strange for our small community.

Most of this information is not available in any book or other written source since it is the first time that it has been researched and organized into a full text. All photos accompanying the text are mine, if not otherwise stated.

Plant species are cross checked with the checklist of indigenous and naturalized vascular plants occurring on the Ionian Islands made by the scientific team of the Institute of Botany from the University of Vienna. The checklist can be found online in the Flora Ionica Project Page:

<https://floraionica.univie.ac.at/index.php?site=19>

### 3. Geographical and Historical Framework: The island of Corfu

Corfu is an island on the northwest border of Greece. It stands between the Greek mainland, Albania and Italy. It is surrounded from the small islets of Othoni, Ereikousa, Mathraki and the islands of Paxos and Antipaxos further south.

Corfu's highest mountains are Pantokrator (the ancient Istoni) (906 m) situated to the north and Agioi Deka (573 m), in the southeast. In the middle of the island, there is a plain called the Ropa Valley. There are plenty of wetlands scattered here and there: streams, rivers, lakes and coastal lagoons. The dunes of Lake Korrision and the salt pans in Lefkimi are unique and beautiful ecosystems.

Many of the naturally occurring ecosystems of Corfu are protected areas under Natura 2000 or designated as "Special Protection Areas" under the European Union Directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds. Unfortunately, the protection status awarded to them and their environmental significance haven't managed to protect them from the threat of being sold to international companies that will exploit them for their touristic potential, threatening their beauty and their importance as wildlife refuges.

The unique Corfiot olive grove, although protected by law, experiences constant threat to its fundamental character.

The climate is typically Mediterranean with plenty of rain in the winter and hot dry summers.

A wide variety of ecosystems offering habitats with different characteristics to all forms of life are the reason for the great diversity of plants, birds, insects, reptiles and mammals that exist on the island.

The plant communities create a rich flora that totals some fourteen hundred species. Exceptional among them are the many orchid species which can be found all around Corfu.

Traces of people living on the island date back to the Neolithic period with many significant findings in caves, some of which can be seen at the Archaeological Museum in Corfu town. In a settlement dating from the 7<sup>th</sup> millennium BC in Sidari, wild harvested elderberries and sea buckthorn fruits were found. There is no evidence so far if they were used as food or medicine. Since then, agriculture has formed and shaped the island's vegetation with terraced fields at high altitudes (mostly abandoned today) and enormous olive groves that dominate the landscape.

The relationship between plants and the locals departs from linear time and enters myth with the account of Media, one of the most ancient herbal healers, visiting Corfu.

One can easily trace in her name the root of the prefix *med*, which exists in all words that have to do with medicine.

The ancient Greek word *Media* (Μήδεια) comes from the verb *midome* (μήδομαι), which means “I think, I have in mind, I find solutions” and also, “I care, I invent, I produce, I make”.

The ancient Greek root *mid* (μηδ) became *med* in Latin and accompanies words like *medicabilis*, *medicina*, *medicinalis* etc.

All of the aforementioned meanings of the word (treat, care, think, invent, produce, make, find solutions, poison, magic, cosmetic, remedy) have to do with Media, the ancient wise woman. Media’s lover’s name is also connected with healing since *Iasonas* (Ιάσωνας – Jason) is a word derived from the word *iasis* (ίαση) which means “healing”. The Greek word *iatros* (ιατρός) which means “doctor” derives from the same root. Jason studied herbal medicine with the centaur Cheiron before his journey to Colchis.

As described in the poem “Argonautica” by Apollonius of Rhodes, Jason and Media sailed to Corfu pursued by the ships of Media’s father, King Aeetes. Corfiots welcomed the couple, but soon the soldiers of Colchis arrived and asked Corfu’s King Alcinous to decide on the couple’s fate since tradition didn’t allow two foreign armies (the Colchis and the Argonauts) to give battle on Corfiot territory. The couple got married during the night under the protection of the Queen, and from that point on they were officially together.

The wedding took place in a cave with two entrances, which until 300 BC was still called “Media’s Sacred Cave”. This is the same cave in which the nymph Makris also found refuge after secretly raising the baby god Dionysus. In order to thank Makris for her help, Media offered her and her sisters eternal youth by replacing all the blood in their bodies with a magic potion.

That was the first recorded healing act to take place on the island of Corfu and, furthermore, at the hands of one of the most famous herbal medicine women of antiquity.

One century went by and Corfu is mentioned again in one of the most famous epic poems of mankind, Homer’s “Odyssey”. The garden of the palace of King Alcinous has the most beautiful trees: pears, pomegranates, apples, figs, olive trees. There is also an excellent vineyard and a place where the grapes are laid down under the sun to be made into raisins. Beautiful flowers are arranged everywhere.

The island of Scheria, the mythical home of the Phaeacians where Odysseus found refuge and help to return to Ithaca is Corfu according to the legend and we can trace even back then, the love that Corfiots still have for plants. All of the plants mentioned above still exist on the island and most of them are traditionally used as medicine.

In later years, botanists from all over Europe visited Corfu taking notes and drawing the wild plants. In 1814, “Flora Corcirensis” was printed in Italian, written by the Doctor Michael Trivoli Pierri, describing more than 1,000 plants growing on the island. Pierri was a professor at the Ionian Academy, the first academic institution established in Greece. The Ionian Academy started in 1824 and was located in Corfu. A botanical garden was organized with more than

4,000 local plants for the needs of the students of the Medical School. Unfortunately, nothing remains of this garden nowadays and no other information is available about it.

In the present day, the island's vegetation suffers from the extensive use of strong chemical weed killers and pesticides. There is an on-going crisis around the local authorities' inability to dispose effectively of the island's refuse, reaching particularly high levels in the summer and polluting both the earth and the water, which has at least moved the locals to take action to find solutions. The island is in danger from what is the real impact of the financial crisis: no state mechanism really exists and can work effectively. Furthermore, the land and much of the other resources are increasingly being sold off for international companies to exploit. It seems that the next time people have to rely on plants to survive, they may not be there anymore... However, many locals are fighting in any way they can to save the land and save any bits of knowledge on how to live in harmony with the land, no matter what the future holds...

#### 4. Domestic Medicine



Although Corfiots relied on herbs for healing, they didn't really have a medicine cabinet. Herbs were kept hanging upside down in the kitchen and many of them were used both as food and medicine. People had no spare ingredients and so all medicine was made on the spot, just when it was needed.

Most of the preparations were not made to be preserved and were consumed during the day. They were mostly teas, plasters – i.e. poultices spread on protective dressings, poultices and syrups (thicker teas that were preserved for one or two days).

In Kato Korakiana (the village I live in) there is a family that seems to have influenced the herbal knowledge of all the families in the area. This is the Metallinos family, who came from Crete many generations ago, fleeing the Turks, like many Cretan families at that time. They arrived in Corfu under the leadership of a family member who was a priest and they still mostly live around the church built at that time.

It seems that there were great healers in that family who brought to Corfu the Cretan herbal tradition. Nowadays, it is hard to find out what was theirs and what they found here, but there are certain herbal remedies that always make me ask further questions about the person that taught it to the one talking to me about it, knowing beforehand that it will all come down to the Metallinos family.

The women in this family were known to be bone setters until recently. The last person that practiced died last year in her 90s, and it seems that no one else will follow after her.

Exceptional among them is in my mind Eugenia. Eugenia was a housewife who spent her days with her children and working hard in the fields, but she always found a way to help everyone in need. She was the one that gave the injections when needed without being paid for it and it was a common occurrence for people to look all over for her to ask her herbal advice. She shared the herbal knowledge she had obtained from the Metallinos family freely to help her community, without asking for anything in return.

### **A.Colds and Flu**

Garlic has always been the main means to prevent illness. Women traditionally incorporated large amounts of garlic in everyday food to keep their loved ones safe and well.

At the first sign of illness, an infused oil for massaging the body was the first thing to be made. All the people I have talked with remember that – usually their grandmother – would put a *briki* (a small metal pot used to make coffee) on a low flame and would infuse chamomile flowers or the fruits of the eucalyptus in olive oil. Most people remember the eucalyptus fruit being called *koumbia*, which means buttons.



Everyone knew when someone was ill because the eucalyptus infused oil had a strong distinctive smell that would travel across the whole neighborhood.

Women massaged this oil all over the patient's body, just before going to bed. It seems love was an important ingredient in this treatment, which most people enjoyed deeply, in spite of their illness.

Maria Faita remembers that her grandmother massaged her with eucalyptus oil on the neck, the shoulders, the back, the hands, the legs and every joint of her body. The eucalyptus essential oils helped the patient breathe freely and sleep calmly during the night. The next morning the cold was usually gone.

The warm herbs strained from the oil were wrapped in a piece of old bed linen and were kept around the neck. This practice was called *stoupata*. Slightly warm ash from the hearth was also used like this. Socks made at home from sheep's wool were filled with warm ash and kept around the neck, on the chest or any part of the body that was in pain.

Herbal plasters with flax seed or mustard seed were also applied on the chest or the back to ease a cough and help expectorate phlegm. Maria Faita told me that she was strictly taught not to apply plasters on both the chest and the back, because this trapped the phlegm in the lungs and could easily lead to bronchitis or pneumonia.

Maria described the procedure to make plasters with mustard seed as below:

“Infuse the mustard seed in olive oil over a low flame –mustard seed loses its healing constituents when burnt. Spread the oil and the mustard seed on some gauze or a piece of cloth. Apply as hot as tolerated. The plaster was applied on the chest for colds with congestion in the lungs. The mustard seed plaster will thin and move the phlegm, easing expectoration. People used to apply mustard seed plasters topically for different kinds of pain as well.”

According to Maria, the adults used to boil the leaves of the mustard plant, *Sinapis alba* and drink the broth with red wine added to alleviate a cold.

Even Masigka, the doctor in Paxos, had to spend all the evenings of the long days that she traveled all around the island on a donkey to visit patients, grinding flax and mustard seed for the following day's plasters.

Flax was cultivated in Corfu to make cloth but also to be used for plasters. People I have talked with in other Ionian islands remember that their mothers weaved pieces of woolen cloth to be used specifically as flax seed plasters.

Warm rubbing alcohol could also be used to rub on the chest or the back. This is a practice that is still alive today in most villages. The bottle containing the alcohol was placed in a pan with warm water until the wanted temperature was obtained.

Syrups were made to help with cough and congestion. Maria Faita remembers her grandmother making syrup for the colds. In a briki she placed equal quantities of chopped dried jujube, dried raisins and dried figs. She added a cinnamon stick and covered everything with double the amount of water. She boiled it over a medium flame until the liquid was reduced by half. She strained and added honey. For the adults, she also added brandy. A spoonful of the syrup was taken several times during the day and especially in the evening and after waking up in the morning when symptoms aggravated.

The basic ingredients for the above recipe came from nature and the garden. This was extremely important at that time, as they had to rely on what was free or cheap and easily available.

Flaxseed syrup is another example from a grandmother living in Corfu town:

“As cough syrup, my mother-in-law boiled flaxseed... Not too long because it becomes very thick. When ready, she removed it from the flame and added honey and lemon... and she used this like a syrup.” (Eleni Zoumbou)

Joy Konstantis shared with me another syrup recipe that she learned from her Corfiot mother-in-law in the village of Vistonas:

“She had a leaf of rustyback, a leaf of navelwort, some sage, rosemary and mint in a large (4 Greek coffee cup) briki. The briki was filled with water and a spoonful of sugar was added. Everything was boiled till well reduced. The syrup had a clear ruby red color when ready. She left it to cool and gave half a small ouzo glass to each child before bed.”

Rustyback, *Asplenium ceterach*, is a fern species growing on stone walls and rocky soils. It is traditionally used to treat coughs. It is also a diuretic used for urinary tract infections. It is widely known for breaking down stones in the kidneys and helping to pass them out of the body. It is a bitter herb with an affinity for the lungs, the spleen and the kidneys. This herb is known as *skorpidi* in Corfu. The word means the herb that breaks the stones.



Photo: Rustyback, *Asplenium ceterach*

Navelwort, *Umbilicus rupestris* has taken its name from the navel like leaves. It grows on walls, in crevices or tree cavities. It is also used as a poultice for burns, injuries and inflamed skin problems. It is a soothing demulcent herb. The local name is *petrokafki*.

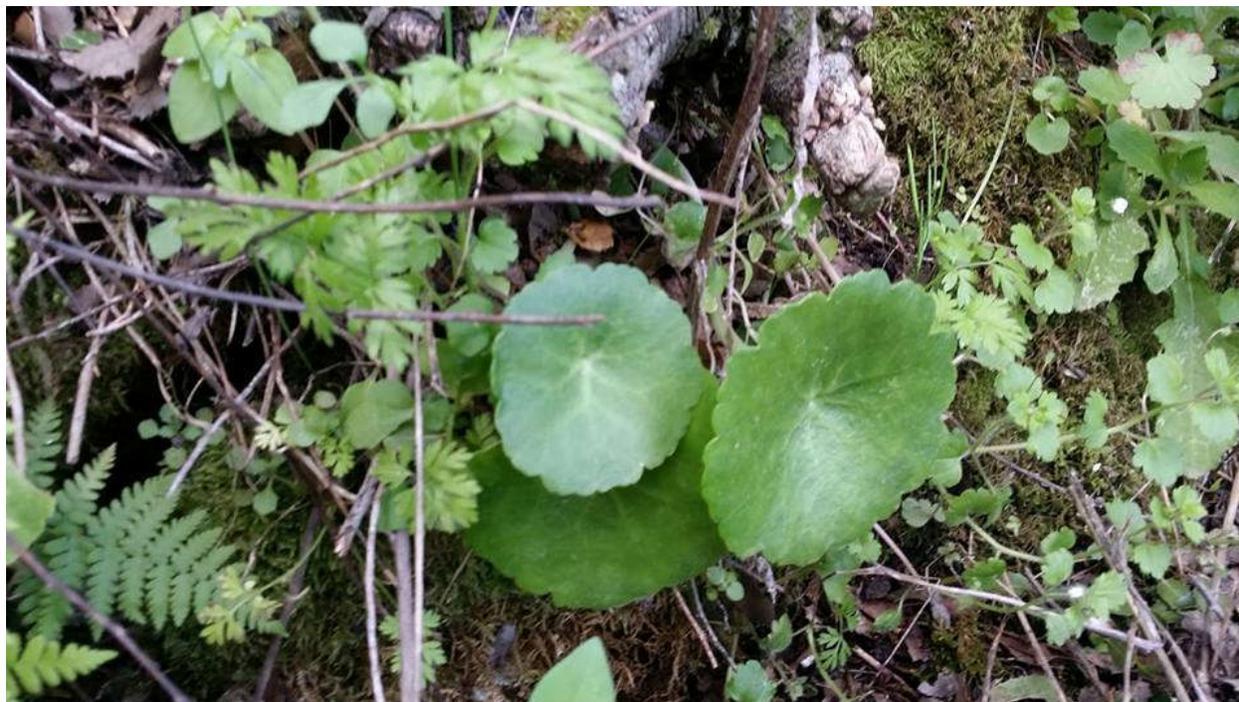


Photo: Navelwort, *Umbilicus rupestris*

The persons that shared these recipes with me can't distinguish between the different types of cough and they have no idea if the person they learned the recipe from could. They probably could but they never shared this knowledge with them as they were children at that time or they typically developed the same kind of cough for which the specific syrup worked well.

Several aromatic antimicrobial herbs were taken liberally as tea to relieve cold symptoms. Sage, *Salvia fruticosa* and oregano, *Origanum vulgare* were the most popular. Mallow, *Malva sylvestris* was made into tea to relieve a sore throat and a dry cough. Calamintha, *Calamintha nepeta* was the plant most commonly used as tea for colds on Paxos island.

European centaury, *Centaurium erythraea*, which is also known as feverwort, was used as a tea to treat high persistent fever. It is a very bitter plant in the gentianaceae family, which was used instead of quinine in the treatment of malaria. Malaria was quite common in old rural Corfu due to the many wetlands all over the island. European centaury is an excellent herb to be included in bitter digestive formulas. The tea made from the flowers was also used as a wash to strengthen the hair.



Photo: European centaury, *Centaureum erythraea*

The most common treatment for high fever was compresses dipped in a pot with vinegar diluted in water and applied on the forehead and the wrists.

Warm oil was dropped in the ears for ear aches. The oil was usually taken from the vigil lamp, where it was always kept warm from the little flame burning inside.

Drops of mother's milk were used to cure ear infections and relieve earache. Breastfeeding mothers were always willing to provide this valuable treatment whenever there was a need for it.

Warm donkey milk calmed down a persistent cough, especially whooping cough. Natasa Chalikiopoulou from the village of Xoroepiskopoi told me the following:

“My father told me that when they had whooping cough as kids, their parents brought crabs from the river. They cooked them over the fire, took the flesh, powdered it and diluted the powder in water. They gave it them to drink to relieve coughing.”

The crab species living in the rivers of Corfu is the *Potamon fluviatile*.

Diarrhea as a symptom of stomach flu was addressed with blackberry leaf tea, tea made from the leaves of the plant called Christ's thorn, *Paliurus spina-christi*, or tea made from the peel and white internal membranes of pomegranates.

Cupping with or without scarification was very popular and almost all women and many men were trained by the family elders on how to do it.



Photo: Cupping

Photo credit: Eugenia Bekatorou



Photo: The Astor razor used for cupping with scarification

Photo credit: Eugenia Bekatorou



Photo: Tool for cupping with scarification.

Photo credit: Afroditi Kremmida

These were all simple cures with things that were easily available but, according to local people, highly effective.

Last but not least, at the very first sign of illness people used to drink what is known all over Greece as *rakomelo*. *Rakomelo* works miracles with colds and it is a warming drink to have during winter time.

Eugenia Vitouladiti remembers her grandmother making the *rakomelo* to treat a sore throat. In a *briki*, she warmed half a Greek coffee cup (let's say, a quarter of a cooking cup) of *raki* (distilled grape spirit) with a teaspoon of honey. She removed it from the heat when it started foaming and added 4 drops of lemon juice and a sprinkle of thyme.

To make a bottle of *rakomelo* to have beforehand for treatment, or simply for pleasure, we can carefully warm 1 liter *raki* or *tsipouro* (another potent Greek spirit) with 6 tablespoons of good quality local honey (2 tablespoons of honey for every cup of *raki*). Thyme honey is usually used in Greece. Caution must be taken when we have alcohol near a naked flame because it can ignite. Two cinnamon sticks and 1 tablespoon of cloves can be added, if we like. Stir with a spoon till the honey is fully incorporated into the alcohol and the alcohol starts boiling. Remove from the heat and add one tablespoon of an aromatic antimicrobial herb – thyme or dittany

are great options. Let it infuse covered for half an hour. Strain and bottle. Serve at room temperature or warm.

### **B.Accidents**

The most common plant used for wound healing in first aid situations was *Inula viscosa*. The scientific name has recently changed to *Dittrichia viscosa* but all over Corfu this plant is known as *krouzia*.



*Inula* is a weed in Corfu growing in all cultivated areas and so this plant was always close by when people had accidents while working long hours in the fields. The leaves were crushed and used as a poultice on cuts, wounds and insect bites.

The sticky leaves were famous for their use as toilet paper when kids had an upset stomach after eating too many figs, mulberries or *koumara* (the fruit of the strawberry tree), as Eleni Armeni remembers. Spyridoula Avloniti has told me that the leaves are still spread on top of potatoes to preserve them year round. The leaves contain essential oils with insect repelling properties.

Inula was also a famous remedy for hemorrhoids. The leaves were mostly used as a poultice. Mary Varsaki told me an interesting story she heard from her aunt, in which inula was used as a bath:

“My aunt suffered from hemorrhoids. Once, she went to the church and she didn’t sit during the service because she couldn’t. In a confidential talk with the priest, who asked the reason she had to stand for hours, he advised her to boil plenty of inula leaves, strain the tea into a big pot and sit in there for as long as she could. She claims that the problem disappeared afterwards.”

Garlic was also used on wounds for its antimicrobial properties. Something else used as an antimicrobial powder was ground cuttlebone, which can easily be found in most beaches.



“We powdered the cuttlebone and used it as an antiseptic powder for the wounds of our sheep and goats.” (Maria Faita)

In other parts of Greece, people used the powdered cuttlebone in similar ways. They even rubbed it on to the teeth and gums for relevant problems. Cuttlefish ink, bone, flesh and eggs have been used since antiquity for many health issues.

An old man from a village called Gianades once sent me some leaves from a plant they used on wounds, especially infected wounds with pus. He called this plant *threftohorto* which means the plant that “nourishes” the wound to heal it. I happily identified the plant as wood betony, *Stachys germanica*, one of my most beloved plants.



Photo: Flowering wood bettony

Nitsa Dafni, a lady from Corfu town, shared with me the following story:

“When I was 4 years old (74yearsago), I had a bad accident as I was running. My leg was injured and the wound was swollen and inflamed. My mother took me to the doctor and he said I should have surgery. On the way to town, my mother met an old man she knew and told him the story. He tried to convince her to avoid the surgery because he didn’t trust the doctor. My godmother told my mother about this herb. She cooked it in olive oil, strained it and applied the warm olive oil on my leg. After ten days, I woke up one night and the whole bed was covered by the pus that had come out of the wound. After that, I was much better. My mother applied walnut leaf poultices on the wound until it was completely cured.

When I was 11, I had another accident while playing in a river. My leg was swollen again and my mother was very worried. She infused the same plant in olive oil and applied it again to my leg. Soon, my leg was completely healed’

Nitsa couldn’t remember the name of the plant but she said that she knew where to find it. It was once very common in the old town, growing between the stones of the pavements. She brought me the plant which was identified as epazote, *Dysphania ambrosoides* by Christian Gilli, botanist at the University of Vienna.



Photo: Epazote, *Dyshpania ambrosoides*

Spiros Metallinos has shared with me that his family used to keep in a drawer a puffball mushroom to use for burns. The spores in the puffball mushroom, *Lycoperdon pyriforme*, resemble ground coffee and modern scientific research has shown that they have strong antimicrobial properties. Shepherds in the mainland always carried this mushroom in their knapsack to use on wounds for themselves or their animals. The mushroom was opened when there was a need. Otherwise, it was replaced every season. Other people have shared with me that the spores were mixed with olive oil to make a simple salve. Recently, I was told by Sia Banou from Klimatia village that the puffball spores are an excellent remedy for chilblains.



Photo: Puffball mushroom, *Lycoperdon pyriforme*

Fig milk was the most common treatment for insect bites. It seems, however, that prevention was the most important means of protection since scorpions and other venomous insects were abundant in the old stone-made houses people used to live in and in the fields. Many of my friends remember their mother cooking scorpions or wasps in a cast iron pan over the fire till completely dried of all juices. The dried insects were turned into powder and were added in their morning tea. This powder was known as *skourmo*.

Every kid took skourmo once and the dosage was a whole scorpion cooked and powdered in the tea. The whole village was aware of which child had already taken the skourmo and who hadn't because this altered the level of danger for each person, if beaten. People that had it as kids and were later stung by a scorpion report that it felt like "a wasp sting".

Eleni Zoumbou remembers that her grandmother cooked the scorpion in olive oil and then, gave each child a tablespoon of this oil. The scorpion oil tablespoon was taken once in lifetime, similarly to skourmo.

Other people describe that the scorpion was added alive in a jar with olive oil and while dying, he released the poison into the oil. The oil was applied on scorpion bites and people swear it reduced the pain drastically.



Photo: Scorpion infused oil from a family living currently in the old village of Peritheia.

In Corfu, there are three species of scorpions. *Euscorpius corcyraeus* (which is endemic to the island), *Euscorpius italicus* and the Mediterranean scorpion *Mesobuthus gibbosus*.

Snake skins were also powdered and then infused in oil over a medium heat to treat several skin problems. Skin problems, especially on the feet, were very common since people rarely wore shoes and went around barefoot. Many people have also shared with me that most people working as builders kept a snake skin in a drawer to infuse in olive oil in order to prevent tetanus from accidents at work. This oil was applied on the wound when they had accidents with dirty old metal tools and other items. It seems it was common practice, although I have no idea if it really worked. However, the fact that snakes were used for tetanus in traditional Chinese medicine must be something more than coincidence!

The navelwort, *Umbilicus rupestris*, in juice or poultice form, was also used to treat various skin problems, especially the ones involving inflammation.

Dental issues are a nightmare for people with no access to the dentist. Unfortunately, I experienced that in our days with refugees and illegal immigrants. People will definitely try to get rid of a tooth that causes problems if there is no permanent help available. Ouzo mouth washes will numb the pain for a while but help will be needed at some point. Most people in Corfu remember their grandparents using hellebore, *Helleborus cyclophyllous*, known as *skarfi*, for decaying teeth. In the past, people would rinse their mouth with hellebore root tea and after a while the problematic tooth would simply fall out. Some people say that this tea will destroy most of the teeth if used quite often and some others say that only the ones with a problem would be affected. Hellebore is a very toxic plant and the tea was never swallowed.



Photo: Hellebore, *Helleborous cyclophyllus*

Fractures were treated by specialized healers who had usually learned this healing art from their parents. Healers touched the wounded area with their fingers to feel what had happened to the bones and, comparing both sides of the body, aligned the bones before immobilization. Then, the broken extremity was secured in place with a poultice made of grated olive oil soap, ouzo and an egg white. The poultice was wrapped around the leg or the hand and allowed to harden. If further immobilization was needed, canes would be tied on top. Ten days later, they would break the plaster, wash the extremity with grated olive oil soap in warm water and then

would massage with olive oil. If they were happy with the result, they would advise the patient to continue washing and massaging the area for ten more days. If the bone wasn't completely healed, a new plaster would be applied.

The above description was given to me by Maria Faita who lived close by to a healer and enjoyed as a child spending time with her and watching what she was doing. That was pretty easy since all treatments happened on the road, outside the healer's home.

The results of these therapies depended on the experience and the skillfulness of the healer. It seems that most healers, at least the ones that were known all over the island were very talented and all the people I have met that were treated by them were completely cured with no side effects.

Sprains and strains were easier to deal with at home. Elder was the herb most commonly used.

"There is a lady in the village that once had a very bad strain. The ankle was really inflamed and she couldn't walk. An old man that used to be a teacher told her to make a poultice with elder leaves and the soft branches. She kept the poultice on during the night and the next day her ankle was absolutely fine. She was very much impressed and tells this story to everyone since then." (Agathi Sirioti Karavidi)

Another recipe is the following:

"For strains and sprains, my grandmother would infuse days-old bread in red wine. She boiled the mixture till the wine was reduced by half. Then, she took the bread out, pressed well to remove the wine and added oregano. She made a poultice and spread that on a piece of cloth. She applied the poultice to the damaged area and she said that by the next day it was completely healed." (Eleni Zoumbou)

### C. Personal Care and Beauty



Photo: Violet, *Viola odorata*

Women of Corfu had no time to spend on trying to look beautiful since they were working all day long in the fields and then they had to take care of the house, their elderly relatives and the kids. Furthermore, married women were not supposed to care too much for their beauty since that was behavior suggesting interest in having an affair with men other than their own husbands.

Strengthening the hair was however everyone's concern! This is a recipe from Maria Faita's grandmother for the hair:

"Boil rainwater in a pan with cypress tree cones, an olive tree twig with the leaves on, lemon tree leaves or the peel, chamomile, laurel and rosemary till the water turns black. Strain and use this tea to wash and rinse the hair."

Young women used to wash blond hair with St. John's wort tea, chamomile tea, wheat or oat tea to make them look shinier and light colored. Women with black hair used walnut leaf tea to darken the color and even cover grey hair.

Hair was generally washed with rain water mixed with ash from the hearth. Olive oil soap was also commonly used for cleaning the hair.

“Rinsing the hair with thyme tea works miracles with dandruff.” (Aristea Metallinou)

People rubbed sage leaves on their teeth to clean them and keep them healthy, as well as for refreshing the breath.



Photo: Sage, *Salvia fruticosa*

Spiros Metallinos from Korakiana told me that his family burned vine twigs and rubbed the ash on the teeth for cleaning.

Eleni Zoumbou remembers her grandmother using wood ash from the hearth to clean and whiten the teeth.

Women in Corfu town took more care of themselves, even if they were not rich. Eleni Zoumbou has the following memory from her grandmother:

“I will never forget the smell of my Nona (grandmother). I still feel like I am smelling her aroma. Talcum Powder mixed with vanilla. The smell of love, care, tranquility. Angels must smell like this, as well.

She made the talcum powder herself from boiled rice that was left to dry and then it was powdered and mixed with vanilla.”

Other women used to make a cologne from violet flowers, but I haven’t managed to find yet the exact way they managed to preserve violet’s delicate perfume.

“My aunt, Sofia Papavlasopoulou used to make a fragrant cologne with violet flowers. She picked the flowers, made small bouquets and placed them upside down in a bowl with rubbing alcohol in it. She covered the bowl with a piece of cloth and kept it in the shade. I don’t know more details. I only remember that when she removed the flowers from the alcohol, they had completely lost their color.” (Spiros Balis)



Photo: Violet flowers, *Viola odorata*

## D.Pain

Most of the scarce information on pain concerns pain in the joints, arthritic pain and pain from colds and flu.

Corfu is an extremely damp place and people used to live in very dark and cold houses. All treatments have to do with warming the body and trying to remove rheumatic symptoms from the joints.

Mustard seed plasters and woolen socks with warm ash from the hearth were commonly used to relieve pain.

Eleni Zoubou learned the following recipe from her grandmother for arthritic pain:

“My grandmother filled a jar with well-cut oleander (*Nerium oleander*) leaves. She covered the leaves with rubbing alcohol and let it infuse for about a month. Then, she rubbed this wherever she had pain.”



Photo: Oleander, *Nerium oleander*. Oleander is a very toxic plant and in this recipe is used only externally.

Another common treatment for pain in the knees was clematis plasters. *Clematis flammula* is a caustic plant, very common in Corfu. Old women in different villages have mentioned to me the external use of this plant to remove “dampness” from the knees. It was an effective but extremely painful remedy.



Photo: Clematis, *Clematis flammula*

Maria Lampoura, an old lady from the village of Klimatia, shared with me that for pain in the knees, she used to make fern poultices. The pain got stronger after applying the poultice, but after a while it subsided and she felt relieved.

Onion poultices were also commonly used for arthritic pain in the knees. The same is true for cypress oil, which was made by infusing the cones in olive oil and was applied topically to relieve pain in the knees.

## **E. Miscellaneous**

### **1. Violet, *Viola odorata***



“My grandmother used to tell me: ‘Put violets under your pillow to have the sweetest sleep. They are great for anger. ‘The flower tea is relaxing – it is good for coughing.’ And other things that I don’t remember anymore.” (Eleni Neratzi)

“Violets have a delicate fragrant odor and our grandmothers used to say that we should have at least forty in order to harvest them and bring them into the house, so that they would bring luck, and we would have a great year with health and all; so that the hens and the turkeys would have plenty of eggs and young birds. The same went for wild asparagus and black bryony shoots. The first bunch we would bring home had to be forty, at least.” (Maria Faita)

### **2. Lemon Tree Leaves**

“To help me stop breast feeding, my grandmother used to apply lemon tree leaves on my breast, kept in place by the bra. It worked wonders!” (Eleni Zoumbou)

### **3. Mallow Leaves and Flowers, *Malva sylvestris***

The common mallow leaves and flowers were commonly used for constipation.

### **4. Couch Grass, *Cynodon dactylon***

Couch grass is commonly used all over Corfu together with corn silk for passing kidney stones.



### **5. Orange Tree Flowers**

They are commonly used as a relaxing tea for mild insomnia.

### **7. Moss**

“When I was a kid, I had an infected weeping wound in my leg. Doctors gave me several medicines but nothing could heal it. An old woman from the mainland used to live at the same village as us. She told my mother to make an herbal poultice and apply it several times a day on the wound. I don’t know what was in the poultice. I only remember the moss. The lady said the moss would protect my leg from sepsis.” (Eleni Neratzi)

## 8. Cuckoo Pint, *Arum maculatum*

Cuckoo pint is a common weed all over Corfu, known for its toxicity. That was one of the plants children learned to avoid from an early age, as its sap can be very irritating to the skin and its red showy but toxic fruits can easily attract kids to taste them.



Photo credit: Maria Nikolouzou

The only animal known to eat cuckoo pint is the pig and when people wanted to make a new garden somewhere, they always brought pigs in to clean the area of this plant before they started working the land.

It has several names in Greek (*fidohorto* – snakegrass, *drakontia* – dragon plant, *avgo tou fidiou*- snakes eggs), all of them obviously related to snakes, and I was always astonished by the similarity the triangular leaves have with a snake head coming out of the thick undergrowth.

The plant was used medicinally, especially in the mainland. The root was used topically for arthritic pain. The roots were washed and boiled until they became soft and then were applied warm as a plaster on the painful joint.

Another way to use the root was to crush and grind it well in the pestle to become a paste and then boil it with wine until the wine is reduced by half and the root has been completely incorporated. The thick paste left was then applied like a cream on the joint.

The above treatments were really popular in the mainland. In Corfu, only the following story has come up so far on its medicinal use:

“I was down in the Ropa Valley harvesting comfrey and an old lady who was out there with her sheep came up to me. She told me she liked herbs as well. She started talking to me about cuckoopint. She told me that she knew this plant as ‘snake plant’ (*fidohorto*) and this plant helped her thirty years ago. She used to have problems with her throat, which was inflamed all year round, causing high fever, even during the summer heat. An old lady advised her to try the root of this plant. She told her to go home, lie down and eat a piece of the dried root she gave her, as big as a nail. She explained that she would feel very bad at the beginning. It would burn her mouth and throat but she must not be scared. She was so desperate from not being able to recover that she decided to do what she was told. She chewed the root and ate it. It burned a lot but she had never had another problem with her throat since then.” (Eleni Zoumbou)

I am much impressed with the similarity between these stories and the therapeutic use of the Chinese herb *Pinellia ternata* (*ban xia*), which is in the same family. In the book «Η λαϊκή βοτανοθεραπευτική στο Ζαγόρι» (“Traditional Herbal Healing in Zagori Area”, Michael Malamas, 1982) it mentions that the treated cuckoo pint root has been traditionally used in the Zagori area as a cough remedy and an expectorant, as well as a remedy to treat problems in the stomach, especially gastritis and stomach ulcers, due to the gum it contains. The most common use was topically for arthritic pain.

### **8. Judas Tree Leaves, *Cercis siliquastrum***

“We used to apply fresh Judas tree leaves on severe burns. I learned that from Katerina Metallinou, the famous bonesetter from Korakiana. She was my aunt. We applied the leaves until they were completely dried and burnt and then we removed them to apply fresh ones.” (Eleni Iona)

Judas tree leaves were also used to protect the bread from burning in the wood oven. The leaves were harvested in August and they were hung in strings from the ceiling for drying. Corn bread was wrapped in these leaves before baking to protect it from fire. (Natassa Chalikiopoulou)

Fresh cheese was wrapped in Judas tree leaves to be preserved. (Maria Faita)

### 9. Elder Flower, *Sambucus nigra*

“My mother in law used to apply elderflower poultices on swellings. She also used them as eye wash for inflamed or tired eyes.” (Fotini Mikalef)



### 10. Ferns

“My mother infused the ferns in olive oil over a low flame and then she strained it, and when completely cooled, she applied it on burns.” (Spiros Nikopoulos)

### 11. Sonchus, *Sonchus oleraceus*

“It was used for heartburn in the esophagus after eating.” (Maria Faita)

### 12. Leeches for Bloodletting

Leeches are not plants but it was one of the most common natural treatments in old rural Corfu. Spiros Metallinos describes the use of leeches, as following:

“They went to the lake and brought leeches. Usually, it was an old man that brought them from the Merlin area...”

He went barefoot in the lake and used himself as bait. They attached themselves to his legs and then he removed them and kept them in a bottle with lake water. He brought them to my father, when needed... He gave him two, three... depending what my father wanted. My father took the leech and applied it wherever he thought he had a problem. Usually, on the legs. The leech was as small as a worm and then it became that big... from the blood it sucked. When the leech was full, it just fell... My mother had a plate with ash close by. She made the leeches disgorge the blood and then she turned them in the ash, she washed them and put them back in the bottle for later use.”

The old man was called Neophitos Lades and he usually exchanged the leeches for wine...

Anna Lavranou told me about the leech therapy:

“The leech can be removed from the skin either when full, so that it will stop sucking or by throwing salt water where it is attached on the skin. After removing the leech, they applied ash on the bite to stop the blood because the leeches’ saliva contains anticoagulants that thin the blood and keep it running. The ash also helped to prevent infections. They applied ash on the wound and on the leech, since they would use it again.”

Bloodletting was mostly used for hypertension and to prevent strokes.

### **13. Wall Pellitory, *Parietaria officinalis***

“My grandmother took the wall pellitory from the stone hedges to make a tea for urinary tract infections. The whole plant, root and leaves! She had it in the briki with water, boiled it, and strained it. She always told me it was for urinary tract infections, cystitis and sand in the urine.”  
(Eleni Zoumbou)

### **15. Wild Roses, *Rosa sempervirens***

“My grandmother dried wild rose petals, ground them and added the powder to her coffee. She was 92 years old and could thread a needle without wearing glasses.” (MantaleaTrianti)

### **16. Plantain**

The species traditionally used is neither the *Plantago lanceolata*, nor the *Plantago major* (although both of them exist on the island) but the *Plantago coronopus*. The locals call it the “wild plantain” (a herb – not to be confused with the member of the banana family).

“My aunt used to harvest the roots, scrub the little rootlets and boil two handfuls of the chopped root in a liter of wine. She had a small glass in the morning and one in the evening for her spleen.” (Spyridoula Avloniti)



Photo: *Plantago coronopus*

## 5. Plants for Food: Wild edible greens, mushrooms, fruit, nuts, roots.

### Wild Edible Greens–*Horta*

Wild greens have been, and still are, the main food to sustain people in Greece. Wild edible greens and bread (when possible!) have helped people survive through centuries of wars and poverty.

Bread is holy food where I come from. What's more, my grandfather had a mill to grind the wheat into flour, together with a bakery in which to make and sell bread. As soon as the Nazis set foot in our little town during the Second World War, they occupied the mill and the bakery along with the main public buildings. The whole family had to bake bread for the German army, while stealing food from the Nazis was punishable by death.

Grandmother Athena never followed orders, setting an example for all of us, her children and grandchildren. An example to follow or to reject but impossible to ignore. Every day, my grandmother would go to the bakery to bring the daily serving of boiled wild harvested greens to sustain the men working long hours. Whenever possible, she would hide bread loaves in her long panted underwear, covered by her rich cloth folded dress. Either, no one ever noticed her or one of the German soldiers turned a blind eye. I don't think we will ever find out. The point is that she brought the bread home, and with it sustained not only her family, but all the kids living nearby. Bread will always be holy food for me and will always have a special place on my table. May more people turn to cultivating the earth with respect and produce wheat and other cereals in ways that honor these plants that have sustained humanity for millennia.

After the war, life gradually went back to "normal", at least as far as food was concerned. Normal means that people had more things than boiled greens served for lunch and dinner, although many families were in such poverty that *horta* remained their main food for many years to come.

Wild greens are so much connected with everyday life in Greece that they were never missing from our table when I was a child, no matter what the food was. It still remains the typical supper dish for all families living in the countryside. Water boiled wild greens sprinkled with olive oil and lemon juice, a cup of warm wild green broth, bread and olives.

Harvesting wild greens has always been a kind of therapy for most people: a socially accepted excuse to be alone in nature, to heal and nurture oneself by reconnecting with something deeper. For the women, it has always been their freedom to roam in the wilderness alone or with other women. It is their time alone and their time to reconnect with loved ones that are no longer in their lives, as for most people these moments hold the precious memories of the loved ones that taught them this skill. I still know many women in Corfu that are looking forward to the end of the tourist season and the beginning of the rains that will bring back their moments in nature to harvest wild greens.

Edible wild greens appear with the first autumn rains. They increase in number and variety during the winter and finish when the temperature goes up in spring and new plants pop up everywhere.

Wild greens are harvested during the basal rosette leaf stage. People carefully cut the leaves, being sure not to hurt the root. When the plants grow stems, most of the time they are no longer considered suitable for eating. However, this is not always the case, as for certain plants, the young shoots or the leaf tops are what people are after.

The following table contains the plants eaten on the island of Corfu as wild edible greens. Some of them are toxic in certain stages of growth and most of the time are eaten while very young. Others are eaten in very small quantities in mixtures with other greens or after being processed, usually by heat. Most of them, however, are absolutely safe. All of them are very nutritious and even toxic plants have properties that made them important in people's diets. At least, in the past...

| <b>English Common Name</b> | <b>Greek Common Name</b> | <b>Scientific Name</b>          | <b>Notes on the Plant</b>                                    |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Wild Carrot                | Γριτσόρα                 | <i>Daucus carota</i>            | Nontoxic. Can be easily confused with Hemlock.               |
| Sonchus                    | Ζέγκουνας                | <i>Sonchus sp.</i>              | Nontoxic. Eaten also raw as salad.                           |
| Dandelion                  | Πρικαλίδα                | <i>Taraxacum sp.</i>            | Nontoxic.  |
| Chicory                    | Κιχώριο                  | <i>Cichorium sp.</i>            | Nontoxic.  |
| Black Bryony               | Οβριές                   | <i>Tamus communis</i>           | Toxic. Only the young shoots are eaten. Beloved spring food. |
| Asparagus                  | Σπαράγγια                | <i>Asparagus sp.</i>            | Nontoxic.  |
| Butcher's Broom            | Αγγελόνια                | <i>Ruscus aculeatus</i>         | Nontoxic. Young shoots                                       |
| Reichardia                 | Λαγόψωμο                 | <i>Reichardia picroides</i>     | Nontoxic.  |
| Amaranth                   | Βλήτο                    | <i>Amaranthus sp.</i>           | Nontoxic.  |
| Bristly Oxtongue           | Ζαχουλιά                 | <i>Helminthotheca echioides</i> | Nontoxic.  |
| Nettles                    | Τσουκνίδα                | <i>Urtica sp.</i>               | Nontoxic. The green leaf tops are eaten.                     |
| Mediterranean Hartwort     | Μοσχολάχανο              | <i>Tordylium apulum</i>         | Nontoxic. Small quantities in green mixtures as an aromatic. |
| White mustard              | Σινάπι                   | <i>Sinapis alba</i>             | Nontoxic.  |
| Spanish Golden Thistle     | Σκόλυμπος                | <i>Scolymus hispanicus</i>      | Nontoxic.  |

|                           |               |                                  |  |
|---------------------------|---------------|----------------------------------|--|
| Mallow                    | Μολόχα        | <i>Malva sylvestris</i>          | Nontoxic.  |
| European Black Nightshade | Στύφνος       | <i>Solanum nigrum</i>            | Toxic. The young shoots are eaten, always boiled well.               |
| Chard                     | Σέσκλο        | <i>Beta vulgaris</i>             | Nontoxic.  |
| Yellow Dock               | Λάπατο        | <i>Rumex sp.</i>                 | Small quantities in mixtures because of the oxalic acid.             |
| Milk Thistle              | Γαϊδουράγκαθο | <i>Silybum marianun</i>          | Nontoxic.  |
| Shepherd's Purse          | Κασσέλα       | <i>Capsella bursa – pastoris</i> | Nontoxic.  |
| Knautia                   | Κουφολάχανο   | <i>Knautia integrifolia</i>      | Nontoxic.  |
| Borage                    | Φούρνελας     | <i>Borago officinalis</i>        | Small quantities in green mixtures.                                  |
| Red Stem Stork's Bill     | Περδικονύχι   | <i>Erodium circuitarium</i>      | Nontoxic.  |
| Honesty                   | Λουνάρια      | <i>Lunaria annua</i>             | Nontoxic   |
| Grape hyacinth            | Καλογήρια     | <i>Muscari comosum</i>           | Nontoxic. Eaten boiled with Asparagus and Black Bryony or in omelet. |

The commonest way to cook wild greens is to boil them in salted water. Most people drink the broth warm and serve the greens sprinkled with olive oil and lemon juice.



Another dish that most people in Corfu and the other Ionian islands adore is what is called *tsigari* or *tsigareli*. This is a pungent dish with aromatic wild greens, tomato sauce and plenty of hot pepper. The exact combination of wild greens used to make *tsigari* varies from family to family. The mixtures are complicated and I doubt there is anyone today that still knows why their forebears came up with them. There is a main green, safe and neutral in taste, that serves as the base of the dish and a great variety of wild plants in small quantities, sometimes even just one leaf. Some of them are certainly toxic in larger quantities but are probably balanced by centuries-old wisdom in the specific dish.

The recipe to make *tsigari* is the following:

- 1 ½ - 2 kilos of wild greens trimmed, washed and drained well. (To make a balanced and tasty *tsigari* wild green mixture is a real challenge!)
- 4 spring onions, chopped
- 1 bunch chopped fresh fennel leaves
- 1 bunch chopped fresh parsley
- 2 medium red onions, finely chopped
- 2 fresh tomatoes, chopped
- ½ tablespoonful tomato paste
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 cup olive oil
- 1 teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 2 teaspoons sweet paprika
- Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

Blanch the greens for five minutes and drain well.

Heat the olive oil in a large skillet and cook the onions, the garlic, the parsley and the fennel leaves, stirring, over medium heat until soft, 5 to 7 minutes. Add the tomato paste, cayenne and paprika and stir for about 3 minutes. Add the wilted greens and the tomatoes. Simmer over low heat, uncovered, for about 20 minutes, until the greens are soft and all the pan liquids have cooked off. The dish should be fairly dry. Adjust the seasoning with salt and cayenne, and serve either warm or cold. Pour a little fresh olive oil over the greens once they are cooked, if desired.

Some of the people that shared the recipes they learned from their parents with me cook it with tomato and others don't. The ones that don't said that the dish owes its red tomato sauce color to the hot pepper in it. On the island of Kefalonia, where I come from, the recipe is the

same more or less, but rice is added. My family's recipe includes chopped orange peel for flavor and a unique aroma. On both islands, dried cod fish can be added on special occasions.

The following table contains the wild greens several local people I spoke with included in the tsigari mixture:

| <b>English Common Name</b>   | <b>Greek Common Name</b> | <b>Scientific Name</b>                     | <b>Notes on the Plant</b>   |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|--|---|
| Chard                        | Σέσκλο                   | <i>Beta vulgaris</i>                       | Nontoxic. Used as basic ingredient.   |
| Spinach                      | Σπανάκι                  | <i>Spinacia oleracea</i>                   | Nontoxic. Used as basic ingredient.   |
| Poppy                        | Παπαρούνα                | <i>Papaver rhoeas</i>                      | Nontoxic.   |
| Corky Fruited Water Dropwort | Γρινιόποδας              | <i>Oenanthe pimpinelloides</i>             | The specific species is considered safe by the locals and it is eaten freely.                               |
| Knautia                      | Κουφολάχανο              | <i>Knautia integrifolia</i>                | Nontoxic.   |
| Mediterranean Hartwort       | Μοσχολάχανο              | <i>Tordylium apulum</i>                    | Nontoxic.   |
| Fennel                       | Μάραθο                   | <i>Foeniculum vulgare</i>                  | Nontoxic. The leaves are used as an aromatic.   |
| Parsley                      | Μαϊντανό                 | <i>Petroselinum crispum</i>                | Nontoxic.   |
| Celery                       | Σέλινο                   | <i>Apium graveolens</i>                    | Nontoxic.   |
| Chickweed                    | Πολυκάντερα              | <i>Stellaria media, Stellaria neglecta</i> | Nontoxic.   |
| Borage                       | Φούρνελας                | <i>Borago officinalis</i>                  | Small quantities are traditionally used in wild green mixtures. The plant contains pyrrolizidine alkaloids. |
| Venus' Comb                  | Σκαντζίκι                | <i>Skandix pecten-veneris</i>              | Nontoxic.   |
| Artichoke Leaves             | ΑγκινάρεςΚουλουκάδια     | <i>Cynara cardunculus var. scolymus</i>    | Nontoxic.   |
| Chervil                      | Μυρώνια                  | <i>Anthriscus cerefolium</i>               | Nontoxic.   |
| Mallow                       | Μολόχα                   | <i>Malva sylvestris</i>                    | Nontoxic.   |

|                  |             |                      |   |
|------------------|-------------|----------------------|---|
| Yellow Dock      | Λάπατο      | <i>Rumex sp.</i>     | Small quantities in mixtures. The plant contains oxalic acid. |
| Lesser Celandine | Σάρλιακας   | <i>Ficaria verna</i> | Toxic. Only one leaf, never eaten raw.                        |
|                  | Πρασουλίδα  | <i>Allium sp.</i>    | Nontoxic.   |
|                  | Βορβιλίδια  | <i>Allium sp.</i>    | Nontoxic.   |
|                  | Σκορδαλίνας | <i>Allium sp.</i>    | Nontoxic.   |

Tsigari was the main dish eaten during the forty days fasting before Easter.

Some of the aforementioned greens were also eaten raw, as a salad. The most common ones were sonchus. People loved bitter tasting plants at that time! Wild onions, fennel leaves and some Mediterranean hartwort or borage leaves could be added to the salad.

*Hortopita* is another way to cook wild greens.

### **Wild greens pie – Hortopita**

Ingredients:

- 1 ½ kilos wild greens, washed and thinly sliced
- 4 spring onions, thinly sliced
- 4 tablespoon chopped dill
- 150 grams feta cheese, crumbled
- 1 egg lightly beaten
- Salt and pepper for seasoning
- ½ cup olive oil

Filo pastry dough:

- 1 cup olive oil
- 2 cups water at room temperature
- 1 tablespoon vinegar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 kilo all-purpose flour

Instructions:

Finely chop the greens, the onions and the dill. Heat olive oil on a low heat in a high sided pan or pot. Add the chopped greens and cook gently until they are wilted down to about a third of their original amount. Stir frequently. Remove pan from the heat. Add the beaten egg, salt and pepper and the crumbled feta cheese. Mix well.

To make the filo pastry dough, first pour the olive oil and the water into a large mixing bowl. Add the vinegar and the salt. Gradually add as much flour as needed to absorb all the liquid and form a soft non-sticky dough. If the dough sticks on the hands, add more flour and keep kneading. When ready, leave it aside to rest for 5-10 minutes.

Preheat the oven to 200°C and oil a large baking tray.

Divide your pastry into two and roll out to the length of the baking tray. Place one quantity of the rolled pastry onto the baking tray, ensuring it fits well and lines the edge of the tray.

Spread the greens mixture onto the pastry and ensure it is evenly distributed.

Lay the second rolled piece of pastry over the greens and pinch the sides over to encase the mixture. Pierce the top with a sharp knife.

Brush generously with olive oil and bake in the oven for 45-50 minutes or until the top is browned.

Allow to cool in the tray for at least an hour before slicing through and serving.

### **Fiddleheads**

Young unfurled fern shoots are a delicacy all over Greece. The main way to cook them is as vegetable fritters or in an omelet. In Corfu, people used to enjoy fiddleheads cooked in the fireplace:

“We harvested the fiddleheads together with the black bryony bitter young shoots. We had a piece of aluminum foil covered by a parchment baking paper sheet. We spread the greens and we seasoned with salt, pepper, garlic, oregano, olive oil and a little bit of water. We wrapped everything well and cooked in the wood ash in the fireplace.” (Maria Faita)

### **Grape Hyacinth, *Muscari comosum***

Grape Hyacinth flowers are a spring delicacy. People enjoy them alone or along with the beloved strong bitter tastes of wild asparagus and black bryony, *Tamus communis* shoots. They can be eaten steamed, slightly boiled or in an omelet.



Photo: Grape Hyacinth, *Muscari comosum*. Photo credit: Maria Nikolouzou

### **Grape Hyacinth Flower Omelet**

Ingredients:

Grape hyacinth flowers

Olive oil

Lemon juice

2 Eggs

Salt, Pepper

Wash the grape hyacinth flowers. Heat the olive oil in a pan and add the flowers. Add the lemon juice and stir well for 2-3 minutes until tender.

Crack the eggs into a bowl and whisk with salt and pepper. Add the beaten eggs to the pan. Cook like an omelet.

Another way to cook the flowers is by boiling them for a minute. Serve with olive oil and garlic on warm bread.

### **Mushrooms**

Apart from wild edible greens, people used to know how to identify the mushrooms in their area and how to find fruits and other edibles in the wild. Some of the mushroom species traditionally eaten in Corfu are the following:

| <b>Mushrooms</b>           |   |   |
|----------------------------|---|---|
| <b>Common English Name</b> | <b>Common Greek Name in the Corfiot Dialect</b> | <b>Scientific Name</b>                                      |
| Puffball                   | Αλιποπορδιά                                     | <i>Lycoperdon perlatum</i> ,<br><i>Lycoperdon pyriforme</i> |
| Bearded amanita            | Αλευρίτας                                       | <i>Amanita ovoidea</i>                                      |
| Trooping funnel mushroom   | Μοσκίτης  | <i>Clitocybe geotropa</i>                                   |
| Chanterelles               | Κουτσουρίτσια                                   | <i>Cantharellus cibarius</i>                                |
| Parasol mushroom           | Στεφανίτας                                      | <i>Macrolepiota procera</i>                                 |
| Grisette                   | Κτενίτης  | <i>Amanita vaginata</i>                                     |
| Big sheath mushroom        | Γλυστρίτης                                      | <i>Volvopluteus gloiocephalus</i>                           |

The traditional use of mushrooms should not be considered as proof of their safety and each species should be researched separately based on modern scientific evidence.



Photo: Grisette, *Amanita vaginata* on the left and a parasol mushroom, *Macrolepiota procera* on the right



Photo: Puffball, *Lycoperdon perlatum*. Photo credit: Iosifina Armeni

At this stage, it is great food. Later on when the spores develop, it can be used for medicine.

### Fruit

| <b>Fruit</b>               |   |                             |
|----------------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| <b>Common English Name</b> | <b>Common Greek Name in the Corfiot Dialect</b> | <b>Scientific Name</b>      |
| Strawberry tree            | Κούμαρα   | <i>Arbutus unedo</i>        |
| White mulberries           | Μούρα Άσπρα                                     | <i>Morus alba</i>           |
| Black mulberries           | Μούρα Μαύρα                                     | <i>Morus Nigra</i>          |
| Fig tree                   | Σύκα  | <i>Ficus carica</i>         |
| Jujube tree                | Τζίτζιφα  | <i>Ziziphus jujube</i>      |
| Pomegranate                | Ρόδι  | <i>Punica grannatum</i>     |
| Italian plum               | Κάσσια  | <i>Prunus cocomilia</i>     |
| Wild plum                  | Αγριοκορομηλιά                                  | <i>Prunus Americana</i>     |
| Prickly pear               | Παυλόσκα  | <i>Opuntia ficus-indica</i> |
| Blackberries               | Βατόμουρα                                       | <i>Rubus sanctus</i>        |

Fig cakes are still loved in Corfu! Women make them at the end of summer when figs are available and people store them to enjoy during the Christmas season. If it is a good year for figs, they are enjoyed all over the winter with a glass of tsipouro or ouzo. Maybe too sweet for modern diets, but in the past these were the only sweets people enjoyed on special occasions.

## Fig Cakes – *Sikomaidas*

Ingredients for 6 medium-sized fig cakes:

2 kilos fresh figs

2-3 kilos grapes

2 tablespoons black pepper

6 tablespoons ouzo

2 teaspoons dried aniseeds

In other recipes I've seen, ground cloves and ground laurel leaves are added as spices.



Photo credit: Natassa Chalikiopoulou

Make a cross with a sharp knife on the upper part of the figs and open them up in four without separating them completely. Lay them on a tray covered with muslin. Leave them under the sun for about a week or until they are dried. Turn them upside down, so that they will dry from all sides. Keep them in the house during the night.



Photo Credit: Natassa Chalikiopoulou

Boil water and dip the figs in for a minute. Dry them well with a towel and put them in the oven at a low temperature (100° C) for 15 minutes or keep them in the shade in the fresh air for four more days.

Cut them into very small pieces with scissors. Some of the people I spoke with sprinkle ouzo, mix them well and leave overnight.



Hand squeeze the grapes over a sieve and take the juice. Grape must (thick grape juice including pulp) can be used instead. Sugar, too.

Put all the ingredients in a bowl and knead well until you have a thick paste.

Pour ouzo onto a plate. Take some paste and shape it by hand into a flat cake and then bath it in ouzo on both sides.



Leave the cakes in the sun covered with muslin for 7-8 days. When the cakes are sufficiently dry, wrap them in fig or walnut leaves and tie them with a thread (preferably a natural grass)

The *sikomaidas* are now ready to eat or store in a cupboard.

## Jujube

Jujube is another fruit that Corfiots love to store for their winter glass of tsipouro by the fire. They are eaten fresh in autumn and they are also dried under the sun to be preserved.



Dry under the sun, covered with a cheesecloth for three days. Put in the oven at 125 degrees Celsius with the door slightly open until shrunk and fully dried.



Dried Jujube



Dried jujube can be preserved in ouzo, sprinkled with fennel seed.

“My mother used to wash *gingoles* (jujube) with grape must. Then, she spread them in a baking tray, added fennel seed and baked them in very low oven until dried. Then, she preserved them in glass jars.” (Eleni Zoumpou)

**Koumara, Strawberry tree fruit**



## Strawberry Tree, *Arbutus unedo*



### 6.Domestic Use

People at that time used plants in many ways that we would have never thought of nowadays. This was a time when there was no electricity, no synthetic chemical substances and no place you could buy what you needed. People had to take advantage of whatever could be found in nature in the most creative way.

Houses were made of stone and the floor was just compressed soil. The floor was swept with brooms made from cypress branches, heather, thyme or myrtle.

Shrubby kidney vetch, *Anthyllis hermanniae* or *frokali* as it is called in Corfu was the most popular plant to make brooms.

The dishes were cleaned with fern or fig leaves, ash from the hearth or sage.

Big barrels were washed with large quantities of thyme decoction. Dry thyme branches were used as a strainer in wine making. My mother in law, Eleni Vorou, described the process to clean the barrels as follows:

“In a big pot we had 4-5 quinces, many quince leaves, lemon tree leaves and lemon peel, thyme, the little twigs from the grapes, fennel and water to cover. We boiled everything well

and poured 2-3 of these pots in the barrel. We left it in there for four days. From time to time, we rolled the barrel so that the tea would clean it well.”

The above is the process in a Kefalonian village, an island very close to Corfu. My assumption is thyme decoction was used similarly in Corfu.

“We used to put pebbles, hot water and ash in the barrels to clean them.” (Kerkira Kalogeropoulou, Corfu)

Barrels and other utensils containing oil or fats were cleaned with butterbur, *Petasites hybridus* leaves.

“My husband cleaned barrels containing grease with the butterbur leaves from the river. He rubbed the barrel with the leaves and plenty of water and a soapy foam was formed.” (Dimitra Nalbanti)



Photo: Butterbur, *Petasites hybridus*

The wild aromatic mint called calamintha, *Calamintha nepeta* was specifically used for cleaning the cheese-making pots.

“Wild mint, olive oil soap and hot water were used to clean the cheese-making pots. My family believed that cleaning the pot and the cheese cloth by rubbing well with this herb placed on the olive oil soap bar and hot water was very important for making cheese that wouldn’t develop mold or would be in any other way spoiled. The cheese we made could be preserved long-term and was never spoiled as happened to other people I knew” (Maria Faita)

Clothes, linen and blankets were woven from flax, Spanish broom, *Spartium junceum* or agave, *Agave Americana* fiber.

Aggeliki Vasilaki remembers that when she was young, in the village of Perithea where she was brought up, she and other women harvested Spanish broom stems and then dipped them in the sea in order to ret (i.e. soften) them. Then, they tore the stems and removed the fiber from inside. They let it dry, processed it like wool (carded and spun it) and wove with it on the loom.

All over Corfu, flax was cultivated to be used for weaving. Flax was water retted. In some places it was retted in the sea and in other places in big rock pools filled with rain water. The stems were fermented there – the smell was hard to bear. Then, it was broken, scotched and hackled. After that, it could be spun.

Agave fiber was used as thread for sewing and as yarn to weave in the loom. It was also used to make rope, bags to carry or store things and paper to wrap things in. Mary Mina remembers that her grandfather used to make strings for his violin with agave fibers.

The mature leaves were boiled and while still warm, they were peeled. What was left was the core with the fiber embedded in it. This was boiled again, stirring continuously so that the fiber would be separated from the core. The fiber was washed with plenty of cold water and left to dry under the sun. When dried, it was washed again in warm soapy water to make it shine. This yarn was woven in the loom or used in embroidery.

The plants that were going to be used for fiber were not allowed to bloom because that made the fiber weaker. The leaves contain a sap that can cause severe rashes and the fiber was not touched with bare hands before boiling and washing well.



In Kefalonia, the pointed edges of the agave leaves were used to punch holes in a piece of cloth to make the traditional embroidering technique called *kofto*. With this technique, women decorated the white bed linen, pillow cases and tablecloths usually woven from flax fiber. White cloth embroidered with this technique was also used in several church ceremonies. This is a technique commonly used in all Greek islands, Corfu included.



Photo: Tablecloth made by my grandmother decorated with *kofto*

My mother in law, Eleni Vorou, described to me how her sister used to make sandals with agave fiber during the war.

“My sister took the fiber from the old agave leaves, the ones that had already turned yellow. She wove braids with it and tied them together to make the bottom of the sandals. She sewed onto the sole the braids that would fasten the sandal onto our feet. These were the only shoes we could have at that time.”

Clothes were dyed with walnut leaves, especially when someone had passed away and the female relatives of the specific person had to dye all clothes black. They placed the leaves in a pot and simmered them for about an hour. They strained the liquid, added the fabric and soaked it for many hours. They didn't have a color fixative. The whole process was repeated when colors faded from washing.

Red color was dyed with a powder bought from travelling vendors and I haven't found anyone so far who knows how it was made.

“Yellow color was dyed with quinine.” (Aggeliki Vassilaki)

Katerina Fakiola showed me the *Echium plantagineum* flowers and remembered that her grandmother used to harvest this plant on the mountain to dye purple fabrics.



Photo credit: Maria Nikolouzou

Nikos Vasilakis from the Ropa Valley remembers that fishermen used pine bark to dye the fishing nets brown. They used pieces of bark that had fallen from the tree and could be

found lying around it. They powdered it and boiled it for many hours. The fishing nets were then soaked in the decoction.



From medieval times till the 19th century, the acorns and cups of the valonia oak, *Quercus macrolepis* were collected in Corfu and exported. They were used in tanning and dyeing. Before olive cultivation, oak acorns together with the galls from the kermes oak, *Quercus coccifera* were the major products of Corfu.

However, that was too long ago and so far, I have never met anyone who remembers the use of galls or acorns in dyeing.



Photo: Valonia oak on Mountain Pantokrator.

For washing clothes, the women boiled water with ash from the hearth and myrtle or laurel leaves. They strained the decoction through a big cloth and washed the clothes with it. Dried laurel leaves were spread in the drawers among the clothes as an insect repellent.

Other uses of plants in everyday life I have come across are as follows:

### 1. Glue

“We harvested the resin from the almond tree and kept it in glass bottles. We used a feather to apply it wherever we wanted to use it as a glue.” (Spiros Balis)

### 2. Ink

Ink was made by pressing olives, from the pokeweed fruit or from the oak galls.

### 3. Baskets

Baskets were woven from the young shoots of olive trees and from reeds.



Fern leaves were beautifully arranged in the baskets used to preserve or carry fruit, especially the small aromatic strawberries cultivated in Corfu.

### 4. Boats

Corfu has plenty of wetlands, rivers, lakes and small ponds. People living close by used to make small boats made from rushes, *Juncus subulatus* growing in the area for fishing and transportation. A boat like this was called *rapirela* (παπιρέλα). A rapirela boat can be seen in the folk museum of Sinarades, “Nikos Paktitis”.

## 7. Local Plants in Religious Practice

Most of the population on the island of Corfu belongs to the Greek Orthodox Church. There are also Catholics, Protestants, Anglicans and Jews who hold regular services on the island.

I was born into a family belonging to the Christian Orthodox Church and so I have personal experience and knowledge of this tradition, which I will describe in more depth below.

For the Jewish tradition, I spoke with Nina Vital, a distinguished member of the Corfiot Jewish Community. Nina's father was one of the very few people that returned to Corfu from Auschwitz. The Nazis let him live in order to take advantage of his great talent and knowledge in mechanics.

A black mark on Corfu's history is the moment that the local authorities gave the Nazis the list with the names of the people that belonged to the Jewish community, on June 6<sup>th</sup> 1944. This didn't happen on the other Ionian Islands, where the authorities claimed there were no Jewish families in their territory and all people in danger were kept hidden during the years of the Nazi occupation.

Members of the Corfiot Jewish families were rescued by people they knew and they were mostly hidden in the islands around Corfu, like Paxos and Erikoussa. 1,900 members of the Corfiot Jewish Community were moved to Auschwitz and only 180 people survived.

The first plant that came to Nina's mind was the grape vine. Wine has always held a significant place in Jewish celebrations.

Nina shared with me her memories from the Kiddush in the Shabbath ceremony held in her family and the importance of wine in the specific ceremony. Wine symbolizes blessings and joy. Nina's father gave the blessing holding a glass "full" (never half full) of wine in his right hand because it is written in the "Book of Judges" that "Wine makes God and men happy..." Wheat is also important, as bread is considered holy and is placed next to the glass of wine and the two candles on the table which represents the family altar. Fragrant flowers remind the soul of the essence of the ceremony.

On Jewish New Year's Day, which is called Rosh Hashanah, an apple slice is dipped in honey and eaten after the Kiddush with a prayer for a sweet and happy new year.



Photo: Ceremonial cloth passed from generation to generation, and placed on the tray under the bread, the candles and wine for the Shabbath ceremony in Nina's family.

Other important plants are the palm tree, the myrtle, the willow and the citrus which are used in the Sukkah ceremony. A palm branch, three myrtle branches, two willow branches are held together in a bouquet called *lulav* which is held with the right hand. A citrus called *etrogis* held with the left hand. They are held together and offered to all six directions while praying to show God's presence in the world.

Hoshana Rabbah is a special synagogue ritual held the seventh day of Sukkah. Five short willow branches tied together with a palm leaf are beaten on the front seat until the leaves fall on the ground. The branch itself is ritually thrown on the ground when it has lost its leaves. According to Nina, this symbolizes life after death since leaves will grow again on bare branches every spring.



Photo: Nina's father's old books and ceremonial dress wear.

The Orthodox and Catholic religious tradition on the island are quite similar due to the close relationships between the people practicing them and the many weddings between people belonging to each one. The use of plants attributed to the Christian Orthodox Church is the same as for the Catholic Church in Corfu. Despite the difference in calendar elsewhere, the Catholic Church participates in all events of the Orthodox Church and both Churches celebrate Easter together, having arranged papal dispensation for this. What is unique to the Catholic Church is the washing of feet on Holy Thursday, where the essential oil myrrh is added to the water.

In the Orthodox Church, plants are used for decoration, but in many cases they are also central to the liturgical rituals. Placing flowers or basil at the foot of an icon or around an icon in the church is an expression of a person's faith. It can be as an offering for when someone is in need, but it can simply be out of love and gratitude. It can also be a sign of thankfulness for something that has happened or is yet to happen.

Flower bouquets in vases share their beauty and fragrance with the people present. Fresh flowers are arranged around the icons during the service. On the day that each specific church celebrates the saint to whom it is dedicated, myrtle is the main plant used for decoration.



Photo: Agios Nikolaos, Korakiana

The most important religious celebration on the island of Corfu is Easter. The festivities start on Palm Sunday, the day that the Orthodox Church celebrates the triumphal entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem. Jesus rode on a donkey into Jerusalem and people laid down palm branches in front of him. Palm Sunday is the Sunday before Easter. The blessing and distribution of the palms is an important part of the specific divine liturgy. Palm crosses woven by the people living near the church are placed in a basket in front of the icon of Jesus and prayers are read. The palm crosses are then distributed to the people present. The palm crosses are kept in the *ikonostasi* (the place where the icons are kept in the house) and are considered blessed. When someone is seriously ill or when something bad has happened, women burn the palm crosses, smudging the house to cleanse the energy.

The whole neighborhood or the whole village participates in the weaving of palm crosses the day before Palm Sunday. Olive tree springs, rosemary, sage and bay leaves are also woven into the palm leaf cross.

Young fresh spring palm leaves which are still yellow in color are used to make the palm crosses. Fotis Souvlakis in the village of Agios Vassilios showed me the whole process.









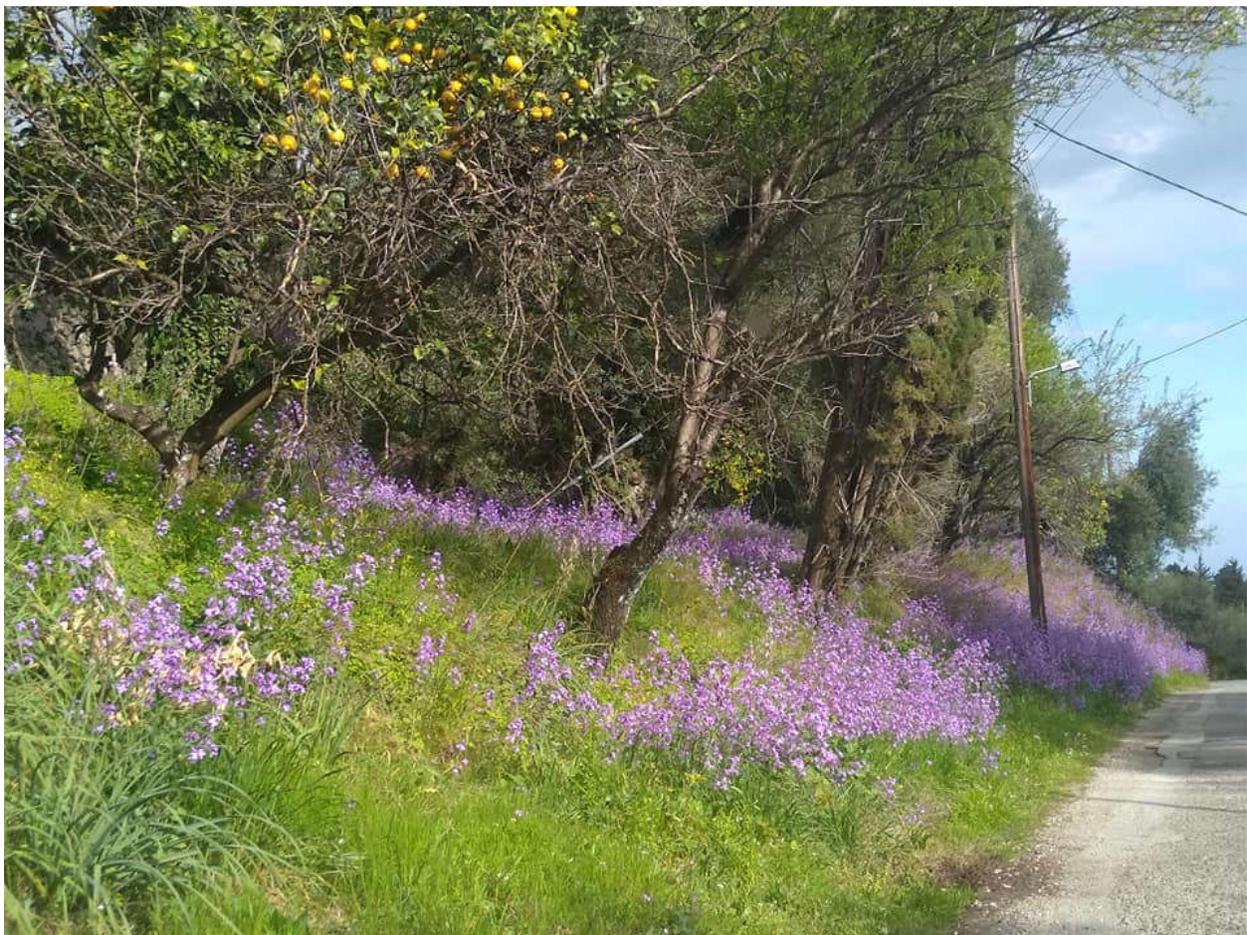
Photo: Agios Nikolaos, Korakiana

Palm leaf stars hang from the lights and the vigil lamps in the church.

Palm branches symbolize victory and decorate the main gates inside and outside the church on special occasions such as the celebration of the Resurrection of Christ, the Exaltation of the Cross, the Epiphany etc.

In Corfu town, a procession of Agios Spyridon, the Saint that protects the island, follows the Divine Liturgy on Palm Sunday. The procession has been held since 1630 and the all of the 18 marching bands of Corfu participate in it. The musicians of the bands marching with the procession wear palm crosses on their hats.

The Holy Week has always been of great significance to Greeks. Even nowadays, many people are deeply connected to the martyrdom of Jesus, which is recalled during this week. When I was a child, Holy Week was the saddest time of the year. We were not allowed to laugh, sing, listen to music, have fun, eat or live like we normally did. Purple is the color of the deep sorrow that spreads day by day all over the island and, we can note, this too is the color of nature at this time of the year. Spring comes to Corfu in violet and purple tones radiating from the explosive Judas tree blossom and the honesty and wild geranium flowers that cover the fields.



All lights in Corfu town are shrouded in purple, including the lanterns in the arcades of the Liston in the central town square, as well as the cross on top of the Venetian Old Fortress.

Purple symbolizes mourning and devotion. Purple cloths hang from the windows and balconies during the *Epitaphios* procession.

The Epitaphios procession, in which a wooden bier bearing an image of Christ and richly decorated in flowers is carried from the church, starts from early morning and finishes at almost midnight. In every church, people living in the area bring flowers from their gardens for the Epitaphios. Nowadays, flowers are also bought and in this case, they are mostly carnations. The most commonly used flower was what is known as *floetes*, *Matthiola incana* in Corfu and it was once very common in the gardens. People that still have them always reserve them for the church.



Photo: Floetes, *Matthiolaincana*



Photo: Women and children in Korakiana arranging the fresh flowers on the Epitaphios before the procession.

The announcement of the Resurrection of Christ is the most important event in the Christian Orthodox Church and laurel is the plant that is connected with what is considered the triumphant victory of life over death.

In Kefalonia, Easter eggs are always dyed with a seaweed that releases red color when boiled. Unfortunately, I haven't managed to find out the scientific name so far. The same happens in the villages situated close to the sea in the south of Corfu.

### **Recipe**

Add 3 liters of water and the seaweed to a large pan. Bring to the boil and skim off all foam. Add two tablespoons of vinegar and one tablespoon of salt. Boil for 5 minutes. Remove from the heat and let the dye cool.



Wash the eggs in soapy water and place them in a single layer in a pan. Strain the dye and pour it over the eggs until completely covered. Boil for twenty minutes. Let the eggs soak in the dye for two to three hours. When pleased with the color, remove eggs with spoon, pat dry with paper towels and let dry. Apply olive oil with a soft cloth to make the color more vivid and intense.



Photo: Eggs are traditionally decorated with flowers and leaves.



The Exaltation of the Holy Cross is celebrated each year on September 14. The feast commemorates the finding of the Cross of Jesus by Saint Helen, the mother of the Emperor Constantine.

On the day of the feast, the Cross is placed on a tray surrounded by branches of basil and flowers to be taken in procession through the church. The tray is placed on a table, and the priest takes the Cross and offers petitions from each side of the table, the four directions of the compass. This represents the universal nature of the offering of Christ upon the Cross. At the conclusion of the service, the people come and venerate the Cross and receive the basil from the priest. The basil is used and offered, as it was the fragrant flower growing where the Cross was found.

Basil is one of the most sacred plants for the Orthodox Church. It is believed it was found by St Helen growing above where the Cross of Christ was hidden in 325 AD. The plant is called *vasilikos* in Greek which means “royal” and it refers to the “King of Kings”, Jesus Christ .

It is used extensively in Church services for blessings and purification. Its main purpose is for sprinkling Holy Water and to bless the faithful. When a blessing with water is done, each person attending comes up to the priest, kisses the Cross he holds, his right hand and is then lightly tapped on the head with basil soaked in Holy Water.

People offer basil to the church when it is needed for a service. It can also be left as an offering beneath icons or relics. Basil is also used to decorate the Church in Epiphany (6th Jan), during Holy Week or even put in a glass of water at home and placed in the “icon corner” (a part of the house analogous to the home altar in Western Christianity).

Once basil has been dipped in Holy Water, it cannot simply be thrown away. It should be buried in a corner of the garden when no person or animal walks, or burnt.

Epiphany is celebrated on January 6<sup>th</sup> each year and a ceremony to bless all waters is held in the church, the sea and the springs that provide water to the community. The church is decorated with cypress branches on that day. Cypress is another sacred plant for the Christian Orthodox Church. The tree is always planted in cemeteries because it is considered a plant that moves energy from the earth to the sky and helps souls to leave the earthly dimension safely.

Frankincense is used as incense in all church ceremonies. In the past, women commonly burned frankincense at home to purify its energy and bless the icon corner. Frankincense smoke symbolizes the prayers that rise to Heaven and it is an offering to God.

Incense is burnt on charcoal in a decorated burner/censer. The priest swings the censer to and fro and the fragrant smoke travels upwards to Heaven – just like the prayers. The priest blesses the sanctuary, icons and relics. When a person is blessed with the fragrance of incense they bow their heads – the fragrance represents God's grace poured out upon the people.

When visiting the cemetery, people clean the grave, light the vigil lamp, place flowers and burn some incense over the grave, as they say prayers for the person that has passed away.

Myrrh is used in many ceremonies, including the christening of a baby, as well as for the purification of the icons and the equipment used in the church.

However, the most sacred plants for the Orthodox Church and for most people in Greece are the olive tree, the vine and the wheat.





People building a new house in the villages of Corfu used to put a bottle of wine and a bottle of oil on the roof so that they would attract abundance of these precious plant products to their household.

Olive oil is used by the Orthodox Church in three of the seven Holy Sacraments: the Baptism, the Chrismation (a form of Confirmation) and the Holy Unction.

The child or adult who is baptized is anointed with sacred olive oil. The priest blesses the water in the font and adds some olive oil which the godparents have brought. The godparents undress the child. The priest makes the symbol of the cross with olive oil on various parts of the child's body. After that the godparents apply olive oil all over the child's body and hand the child to the priest. The priest dips the child in the water into the font three times, a symbol of Christ's three day death and resurrection. At the end the priest gives the child to the godparents who dress it in white clothing, a symbol of purity.

The Holy Unction is a ceremony performed in order to help someone who is ill. The priest reads prayers and then anoints the forehead and the hands of the sick person with olive oil.

Wine plays a significant role in the Eucharist, one of the seven Holy Sacraments and perhaps the most important ceremony for a member of the Orthodox Church. The rite was instituted by Jesus Christ during the Last Supper, giving his disciples bread and wine. Jesus commanded his followers to "do this in memory of me" while referring to the bread as "my body" and the cup of wine as "the new covenant in my blood".

Communion, represented by drinking wine from a common cup at wedding ceremonies, testifies to the union of newlyweds into "one flesh" before God. The same happens during the

“Eucharist” where all people participating in the ceremony have a teaspoon of wine from the same cup.

The third most important plant is the wheat from which the bread that is also used in the Eucharist is made.

Like most Greeks, I was brought up in a family where olive oil, wine and bread were considered sacred and people worked with devotion to produce them.

## 8. Family and Community Ceremonies

In almost every house in Corfu, there was a home altar where the family icons were placed. Family icons are passed from generation to generation and often they are very old and closely connected with the family history. In front of the icons a vigil lamp is always present, within which a small flame is constantly alight. The plant *Ballota acetabulosa* was used as a wick in the vigil lamp. The dried funnel shaped flowers were harvested from the wild and the seeds were removed. Two of these seeds were placed one inside the other and were turned upside down to float on the olive oil. The tip was lit with a match and the little flame kept alight for the whole night without producing any smoke.

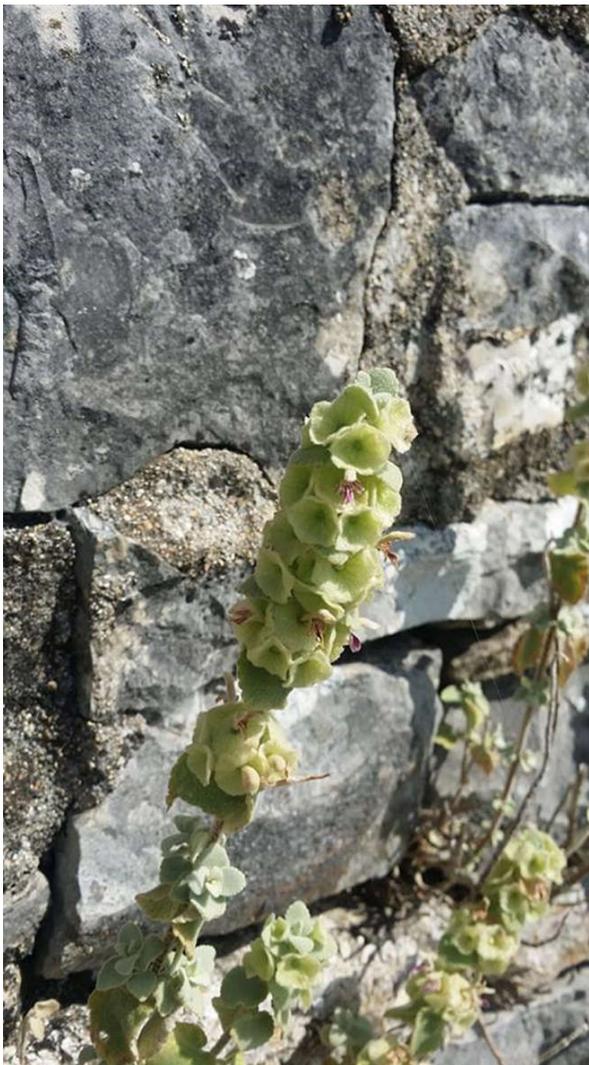


Photo: *Ballota acetabulosa*

On New Year's Eve, usually one of the male members of the family (most probably the father) digs out the bulb of the plant called sea squill, *Urginea maritima* and hangs it outside the main door of the house. People in town can buy the bulb wrapped in aluminum foil (the bulb is toxic)

in the open market. The sea squill can also be placed in the icon altar or it can be hung on the ceiling. People believe it is a protective plant that keeps evil, illness and negative energy away. It is one of the plants symbolizing eternal life and reminds people that the end of a cycle is just the beginning of a new one.



Photo: Sea squill, *Urginea maritima*

On New Year's Day morning the father will ceremonially break a pomegranate on the stairs of the house, wishing that the family will have everything needed during the year in abundance. Pomegranate seeds symbolize abundance and the plant is connected with resurrection, eternal life and the faith that all we really need is always provided.

During the whole Christmas period, Corfiot houses are decorated with cypress branches and myrtle, which the whole family usually harvests in the wild.

There are many occasions on which the families of the island take their food and spend the whole day in nature. The first of May is the one most closely related to plants, as people among other things celebrate the spring rebirth of nature. Family members make flower necklaces to

wear and a big wreath to hang on the main entrance. This wreath will remain there until June the twenty-fourth. This is the day that is dedicated to St. John the Baptist by the Orthodox Church. In most Corfiot villages, people light up big fires in the central square. Families bring the first of May wreath to burn in the communal fire. An open air fiesta follows, where people dance and jump over the low flames.

There are so many family and community ceremonies in Corfu that include plants in one way or another that this could be the theme of another project. These are the most common ones that are still practiced by most families.

## Epilogue

“My grandmother used to sing to nettles before harvesting... and they never stung her.”

(Spiros Thimis)

Spiros shared this memory with me almost two years ago. At the beginning, I was really excited to know about it and then I wrote it in my notebook and completely forgot about it – probably because I had the feeling that there was more to find out in order to be able to do something good with it. I considered it important to find what the words were and who taught this song to his grandmother... and during that time, I couldn't see what was really important in this memory...

This phrase is now to me one of the most important things that came up in this work. The grandmother's song to the plants and the salves in the nutshell are the most significant features of our herbal tradition that has survived to these days. None of it seems to be important for modern science or indicative of an impressive healing potential. However, it comprises something which is closer to what I was looking for when I started this work, and what the real reason for this effort is. So far, these two features are the only remnants of a genuine herbal medicine that comes from a period in time when people's souls and minds were in harmony with the plant spirit world and the Earth's song... Not the era we have talked about so far, but an era that's traces are lost in time, but which is absolutely alive inside me and the memory of which makes my heart beat faster...

Our journey back in time to when life was sustainable and in harmony with the land has just started... This work is constantly being refined and developed... It is changing together with the people that participate in it, with the people inspired by it and with the people that will take it forward...

Like life itself...

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