

Platanus orientalis, a divine gift for Greece

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All over Greece, from the very north to the extreme south, on the mainland and islands alike, in villages or country towns, one finds magnificent, age-old plane trees draped gracefully over churchyards or main squares. In the squares, where all the cafés and tavernas arrange their tables on hot summer days, these noble trees provide cool and pleasant shade. Plane trees also grow naturally along the banks of any river or stream, pond, lake, or spring, dominating the landscape. Indeed, it seems that God offered this tree as a gift to Greek nature!

Platanus orientalis L., the Oriental plane, is endemic in Crete and other southern islands, but has since ancient times also been transplanted all over the mainland of Greece. Its natural distribution extends from the southern Balkans, Crete, the mountains of S.Turkey, W.Syria, N.Iraq and Iran, eastwards to Kashmir, where it is known as the 'chenar'. Throughout its range, it is always linked to the existence of water, and appreciated for its deep shade and beautiful autumn colour. The Ancient Greeks considered this tree a divine gift; Homer, in the *Iliad*, mentions a plane tree in Avlis where the Greeks gathered their fleet to campaign against Troy, while Hippocrates taught his students in the shade of a huge plane tree on the island of Kos. Amazingly, a stump sprout of that original tree, which lived over 2500 years ago, still exists in one of the main squares in Kos Town. During that same period, another noteworthy tree, thought to have been planted by Theophrastus himself, existed in Delphi. In the 4th Century BC, boulevards lined with plane trees were reported to surround Plato's Academy in Athens.

The Oriental plane, a long-lived tree, often attains a height of 30 m and develops a spreading crown; it is unique in its stem diameter which may reach 5m. In standing trees the base of the trunk is often hollow, and is so spacious that it looks like a little sheltered hut. Pausanias, in the 2nd Century AD, described a forest in the NW Peloponnese which consisted of old plane trees with hollow trunks in which people lived. In Tsangarada, a little town on Mount Pelion, a monumental plane tree has been dated to 1,000 years old and is protected by the local District Council, who have declared it a Monument of Nature (see p.51). The local authorities of the nearby town, Mouresi, claim that their plane tree is even older, with civic pride provoking a comical argument! In Greece, the Oriental plane grows from sea level to almost 1500 m. Its leaves are deeply lobed, a feature which differentiates this tree from the American plane, *P. occidentalis*, and the London plane, *P. acerifolia*. The leaves were described by Dioscorides in the 1st Century AD and recommended for use in remedies for various ailments such as eye discharges, inflammation, toothache and even snake bite. The outer dead bark peels off into thin flakes, which when boiled, are used in folk medicine to stop haemorrhage or to relieve



Above: This 1,000-year-old oriental plane in the main square of Tsangarada village in Mount Pelion (Central Greece) is protected as a natural monument

Below: Oriental planes used by storks and herons for nesting in Lake Volvi, 50 km east of Thessaloniki

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burns. With the addition of potassium carbonate, the liquid also produces a traditional dye for silk. It is worth remembering that in the spring, minute hairs produced by the tree may be dislodged by the wind and these can cause irritation to the eyes, nose, mouth and ears of susceptible people; those who suffer from allergies should stay clear of plane trees during this period.

Although the soft wood is not considered to be of premium quality, it is nevertheless widely used in carpentry, for items such as fruit crates and also for wood carving. Its ecological value is immense; growing near water, it attracts the white stork, the grey heron and egrets as a nesting place (see page 51). After World War II most of the riparian forests in Greece were destroyed and the land was taken over for agricultural use. In recent years, however, the ecological value of these forests, consisting mainly of alders, planes, willows and poplars, has been recognised, and many are being conserved in programmes regardless of the cost or the social effects.

Platanus var. *cretica* Dode, from Crete, is an evergreen variety, known since the time of Theophrastus (4th Century BC). According to one myth, after the divine marriage of Europa to Zeus, which took place in the shade of a plane, the tree never lost its leaves again. According to another myth, St John the Evangelist, chased by bandits, took refuge in the hollow of a plane tree. Sadly, he was found and murdered and the tree never again dropped its leaves.

Unfortunately, the value of this precious tree has not been recognised sufficiently in recent years by nurseries and city authorities. Imported hybrid trees, mainly *P. acerifolia* from Italy, are being widely planted in cities and are changing their traditional character. The London plane may grow slightly faster but is more susceptible to mildew caused by *Microsphaera platani* and to stain canker caused by *Ceratocystis fimbriata* f. sp. *platani*. Sadly, when making a profit comes into the reckoning, people tend to forget their history and their own natural treasures. Only education, and the realisation that the historic plants of an area are part of its traditional culture, can protect a society from terrible mistakes such as changing the floral nature of a whole country.

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