

The “miraculous” flora of the Vikos Gorge

Mt Tymfi is among the most interesting floristic regions of Greece with about 1.700 species of plants. In the Vikos gorge, one of the core areas of the Northern Pindos National Park, one can find many of the rare plants of the area. On the steep slopes of the gorge, horse chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum*) grow, a tree native to the countries of the Balkan peninsula that is included in the global list of species in need of protection of the U.N. In spring, color is added to the stone by snowdrops (*Galanthus reginae* – *olgae* subsp. *Vernalis*), Centauries (*Centaurea pawlowskii*) and Madonna Lilies (*Lilium candidum*), all limitedly spread in Greece and protected by legislation such as the Berne Convention, the CITES Treaty and the Presidential Decree 67/1981 of the Greek state. Among the rarest plants in the gorge, Serbian phoenix (*Ramonda serbica*), remnant of an earlier geological period when the climate was tropical in Europe, holds a particular place.

The great floristic value of the area is enhanced by the existence of many medicinal plants, herbs, which are used by the residents of Zagori for therapeutic purposes. In fact, the area was the birthplace of the famous Vikogiatroi (“Doctors” from Vikos), practical healers who cured using various herbs sourced from the large natural pharmacy of the Vikos gorge, like European centaury (*Centaureum erythraea*), Felty germander (*Teucrium polium*), Common sage (*Salvia officinalis*), Mountain tea (*Sideritis raeseri*), Hellebore (*Helleborus cyclophyllus* subsp. *odorus*), St. John’s Wort (*Hypericum perforatum*), etc.

As part of this place, both the old paved steps of Vradeto that climbs the Mezaria gorge (an offshoot of the Vikos gorge) connecting the villages Kapesovo and Vradeto, and the old path that leads from Vradeto to the view point of Beloi (the balcony of Vikos gorge) are very rich in floristic elements.

Across a path of just 5 km, 350 plant species and subspecies are recorded, while one out of three plants, that one encounters hiking there, is characterized as plant of particular interest, as it is either native to Greece or the Balkans, or rare and protected by the law, or, finally, is used as pharmaceutical.

