

HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT OF GOING TO TURKEY?

ALAN MCMURTRIE

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You may be asking WHY? The answer is quite simple: to collect bulbs. Especially iris! The reason I started thinking of Turkey was that I wanted a diploid form of *Iris danfordiae* for hybridising. The commercial form is a triploid and thus sterile.*

Once I realised that I would have to go to Turkey if I wanted to collect *I. danfordiae* I began to learn what other bulbs grew there. This was fascinating. There are bearded iris, Junos, reticulatas (*Iridodictyums*) and *Oncocyclus* iris; several species of each, and in some cases, several colour forms (especially in reticulatas). As if that wasn't enough, there are crocus (as many as 4 species at a given site), tulips, fritillarias, of course lots of muscari, and a multitude of other bulbs. As well, there are primulas, and lo and behold, on the latest trip I even found a paeony.

It didn't take any more convincing. I wanted to go to Turkey and go I did, for three weeks each in 1985 and 1986. In both cases I went in late spring. This allowed me to see some iris in bloom, but was late enough that in most cases the crocus had finished blooming and had had a reasonable chance to rebuild their corms. I doubt that there is any really ideal time to go, unless of course one is after only one species. For example I found gladioli just starting to bloom, but their bulbs were only just beginning to regenerate. I doubted they would survive the 3 to 4 weeks till they were replanted in Canada. However I collected a couple of bulbs just to see. Then I'll know for another time.

For me the trips have been a real adventure and a great learning experience. On the first trip I collected one primula thinking "It's not a bulb, it probably won't even survive the 2½ weeks in the hot car until it's time to go home". But a little common sense (a plastic bag) made all the difference. The plant survived and gave lovely bloom this past spring.

Talking about adventures, I'm glad to say I did find *I. danfordiae*. Out of 4 sites on the first trip I found it only at the last! And that was due to sheer persistence and luck. Actually it was the Turks who found it for me. But without my determination the whole thing wouldn't have happened, and I would have gone home empty-handed, so to speak, even though I had collected lots of bulbs.

*It is especially interesting to realise that the commercial *Iris danfordiae* is a triploid. Originally the plants collected in the wild were diploids. Unfortunately the bulb-growing public wants large flowers: triploids have larger flowers than diploids: thus, over time, bulb growers in Holland discarded the smaller ("inferior") diploids, so that today only triploids are being grown. This means that, contrary to popular belief, the commercial *danfordiae* could never be used to repopulate the wild.

That special day began with me just over 300 km from the site. Because of *danfordiae*'s importance, I decided to put the whole day towards finding it. This meant giving up on side trips to find Junos, which I felt fairly confident of finding. My feelings about finding *danfordiae* were very pessimistic. And those feelings grew stronger as I drove closer and closer to the area. I didn't even know where the village was that I had to find. It wasn't marked on my maps.

Experience had taught me not to get too confident. Even though I had done a lot of research before the trip, there had been many cases where I had an exact kilometrage to find something, but for the life of me I couldn't find it. On the other hand, some vague references proved easy to find. Some of the difficulties can be explained by a number of factors. One of the most likely is that the site is an old one. Man, in his infinite wisdom, has since that time destroyed the site to make way for a farm field, a vineyard, or a house. Another is that the site is not right near the road, but actually several hundred feet or more from it. Another is that the bulbs are only on a small segment of the site, thus you find them only if you're lucky; they may only be on one side of a hill or mountain pass.

Because on two occasions in the previous days Turks had helped me to find the iris I had been looking for, I decided the first thing to do was to find someone to help me. I should point out that my knowledge of Turkish is very limited, but I managed fairly well.

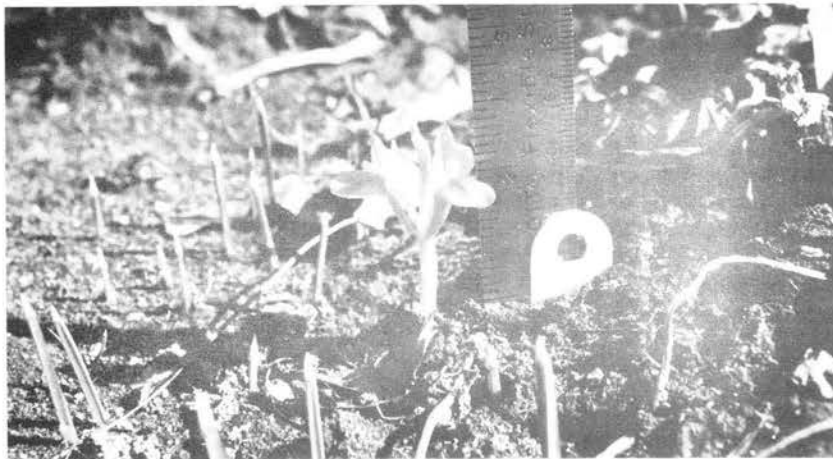
No better place to go than the local tea (*çay*) house. *Çay* houses are an institution in Turkey nowadays. Only very infrequently do you see Turkish coffee. The *çay* houses seem to be everywhere. You always see men in them; and at all hours of the day. I never once saw a woman in one.

I was almost immediately surrounded by curious men who came over to see the stranger from far away. I showed them a bulb of *Iris pamphylica* and asked where I might find one like that with a yellow flower. I only wished I could have understood what they were saying. But I managed to persuade one of them to help me look. Off we went in the car, heading along a bad farm road into a field area. Not all of the area had been ploughed, and it was in this area we found a Juno, which should be *I. persica*. But no *danfordiae*.

The chap seemed to indicate something about back down the valley, so back in the car we got and off we went. At the second village we went into a tea house and again poor *I. pamphylica* got passed around. From what I could make out, we weren't getting too far. Back in the car again and off to the first village. Again we headed straight for the tea house. By this time the bulb of *pamphylica* had become quite battered from all its examinations, but it served its purpose well. It didn't seem to me we were getting anywhere and I indicated to the chap "maybe we should go". But he motioned me to wait a bit.

About 25 or 30 minutes later a youngish-looking fellow whom I had noticed earlier returned with a handful of retics. Wow! Success! I couldn't be 100% certain that it was *danfordiae*, that would only come after one of them bloomed back home, but at that point I was 95% confident they were *Iris danfordiae*.

So we were ready to go back to the chap's village. Well, I should say he was ready to go back. I wanted to see the location where *danfordiae* was.



One bulb bloomed in 1986. It was indeed *I. danfordiae*. I don't know if the bloom was typical. It was 1" in diameter and noticeably smaller than the commercial danfordiae.

I persuaded them to show me and off we went on a 2 km hike. A couple of young fellows tagged along, and they proved quite interesting. They pointed out various plants as we went; some for eating, some for making tea, and even one to take if you were sick.

The site for *I. danfordiae* proved to be quite different from what I expected. It was a 60' rock cliff with pockets of soil, and growing with the irises were muscari and grass. There were a lot of danfordiae bulbs, they seemed smallish. I found a few with seed pods—a very good sign. Interestingly the soil seemed to be quite loamy (pH 6.5 to 7).

So ended a very fateful day. I still had to hurry and drive the chap back to his village, then go on to a large town where I could find a hotel. It was getting dark and driving in Turkey at night is no fun whatsoever. But that night it wasn't going to bother me very much. I'm sure you'll understand I was in a very happy mood.

In addition to *I. danfordiae* I was able to collect a lot of other iris. Experience teaches you a lot. I was quite interested to find 3 sites for spuria iris along the same route I had gone on the first trip, when I returned the next year. In 1985, I hadn't yet found any spurias, so I didn't know how to recognise a colony when I saw one. Now it's extremely easy. I found a lot of Juno iris. They became fairly easy to find, though sometimes I thought the conditions were right but not a one showed up. I was amazed on the first trip at the amount of *Iris pseudo-caucasica* there was east of Van. There were many roads along which it could be found. It surprises me that it is not available commercially; based on how much there is in the wild, I would have thought it should be as available as *I. aucheri*, and I haven't heard any comments about it being difficult to grow, as *I. persica* is well renowned for being (Plate xxiv).

I only wish *reticulatas* were as easy to find. I did find several sites for

them, but they seemed fairly elusive, and I felt I was really lucky to have stumbled upon sites which had not previously been recorded. One grassy slope looked just like another (and it wasn't always a grassy slope where the retics were found). In two cases on the first trip I only found one bulb, and further hunting on the second trip proved fruitless. Overall, what was most fascinating was to see where the iris were growing—in effect, to see how they have been able to survive in the wild as long as they have. Many of the sites were on steep or rocky slopes, too rocky for farming. On many occasions one could find that one side of a hill was being farmed, while the other had some iris. Much of the land is grazed, especially in eastern Turkey, and as a result of over-grazing is fairly barren. The effects show up in the iris. Juno and *Oncoclytus* are very short in height, and often even their short leaves show signs of having their tips eaten. And this happens to the flowers as well.

As anywhere, if you do go plant collecting, restrain yourself from taking many plants. In general, 3 should be plenty. If many collectors go to the same sites, in no time those sites will be wiped out. It's a real tragedy if that happens. An especially important point is to be able to grow what you collect. If you haven't grown a particular plant before then it's probably best to try only one. And if that plant is known to be difficult, and you don't plan to give it special growing conditions or attention, don't collect it. It's criminal to collect a plant knowing it will have only a year or two at most to survive.

I'm certainly not against plant collection. It's just as criminal to hear of populations being wiped out when man creates new farm fields or puts up a building. The key is collecting in moderation, and if at all possible propagating the plants and passing them on to other interested knowledgeable people.

Have I enticed you to consider going to Turkey? There's more I'd love to tell you, but the only way you can really appreciate what I might write is to go there yourself and experience it first hand.,

You might be interested to know that on the first trip I travelled alone, but on the second my wife came along. It's a lot nicer, as you can imagine, travelling in a foreign country with a companion.

Now, if only it was 20 years ago when people like Paul Furse were travelling to Iran and Afghanistan. Without a doubt those are two countries in which I'd like to go plant collecting, but with the conflicts that are currently raging in each, that will have to remain a dream. Maybe one year. . . (Before starting any collecting trip it is *essential* to consult the Ministry of Agriculture (or other appropriate body) in your own country regarding import licences, collecting permits, etc. *Ed.*)



Plate xxiv / *Iris pseudocaucasica* in Turkey

Photo A. McMurtrie