

Mediterranean beauties best admired before the midday sun



| *Cistus fernandesiae* 'Anne Palmer'

Decades spent directing digs in Crete led archaeologist PETER WARREN to develop a fascination in the island's botany and his own *Cistus* Collection

For those who know the Mediterranean countryside, the olive will seem the most characteristic plant. But for plant lovers and botanists *Cistus* (the rock rose or sun rose) has an equal claim.

Its many shades of pink or white flowers are instantly recognisable by their crumpled tissue-paper form. But the leaf forms, sizes and growing habits are extraordinarily varied – you could well not know a plant was a *Cistus* unless you saw the flower. Among the most attractive are pink or white flowers with a dark blotch at the base of each petal; these are either *C. ladanifer* or a plant with it in its parentage.

Growing from the Canary Islands (where there are at least four endemic species) right across Spain, Portugal, France, Italy, Albania and Greece to Turkey and across north Africa, the genus has about 21 species and about 55 natural hybrids. It is often fertile and is naturally promiscuous – Linnaeus must have been delighted. This causes problems of identification with self-seedings in a garden collection from many different sources.

GREEK TREASURES

My National Plant Collection® came about thus. I have been an archaeologist and academic working and directing excavations on Crete for more than 50 years. I have a parallel interest in the island's botany, its botanical history and in the local collection of wild plants for food.

The distribution of *cistus* is not uniform across the Mediterranean. Crete has four species: *Cistus creticus* (unsurprisingly); the beautiful *C. parviflorus* with its relatively small pink flowers and leaves gently rasping to the touch; and two white-flowering plants, *C. salviiifolius* (widespread) and *C. monspeliensis* (standard form but now seemingly confined to one location). Three other *Cistaceae* are

also present in the island: *Fumana*, *Helianthemum* and *Tuberaria*. All *Cistaceae* are part of the incredibly rich Cretan flora, some 1,740 native species, of which no fewer than 160 are endemic.

PLANT HUNTING

We always had a few *cistus* in our garden and from the early 1990s I started to form a collection, never having heard of the *RHS Plant Finder*. When I started using it, I soon learnt never to go to a listed nursery without phoning to check if a plant was available. Not infrequently it no longer was, or is. Sometimes a nursery's name was inaccurate.

Fortunately, I got to hear about Robert Page, then a Collection Holder. Bob visited us and immediately sorted out some names. He has a highly authoritative knowledge of the genus (and of *Halimium* and *x Halimiocistus*) and a superb website (<https://cistuspage.org.uk>).

I also had a good working relationship with the wonderful Chelsea Physic Garden; when it gave up its National Collection status it generously passed to me its "spares"; Bob also gave plants.

By 2004 my Collection was more or less complete, so it seemed worth applying for Collection status, which was granted. Unfortunately, chiefly because nurseries no longer stock *cistus* to anything like the level they did in the 1990s and early 2000s, the Collection is not as complete as it then was. The garden is private but visitors are welcome subject to arrangement. May mornings are the best time since *cistus* lose their flowers through the day.

RAKING IN RESIN

Highly aromatic resin *ladanum* is exuded by the leaves and young stems of some *cistus*, mainly *C. ladanifer*, *C. creticus*, *C. monspeliensis*, in the warmest and sunniest weather.



Cistus × *lenis* 'Grayswood Pink'

In Crete this has been collected from *C. creticus* and exported for centuries. This is done by dragging a rake with long thongs over the bushes – very hard work – or by letting goats browse through the bushes and cutting off their beards when enough ladanum has clung to them. Herodotus describes these methods in the 5th century BC. On 17 October 1998 a villager from the only village where ladanum is still collected handed a lump to me. I asked him how he came by it. “By cutting it from the hair of my goat,” he replied.

✿ Professor Warren holds the *Cistus* and *Halimium* incl × *Halimiocistus* Collection at Wotton-Under-Edge, Gloucestershire

GROWING CONDITIONS

Cistus grow easily in well-drained soil with sunny aspect. In Crete they prefer metamorphic soils but do grow on limestone. Our soil is neutral (pH).

My plants are left to grow to natural size. *C. × lenis* 'Grayswood Pink' can be cut back and others lightly trimmed. Otherwise they need no attention and are pest free. They happily attract bees. All except Canary Island species (or their hybrids) are frost hardy to several degrees.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- *C. x dansereau* 'Jenkyn Place'. Attractive blotches and unique in its long flowering season
- *C. fernandesiae* 'Anne Palmer'. AGM. Beautiful pink flowers, but slightly straggly growing habit
- *C. ladanifer* (and any of its cultivars). Impressive large white or blotched blooms. Can grow to 3m in height
- *C. x laxus* 'Snow White'. Easily grown and with masses of white flowers. Can get large, one of mine is 8.5m in width
- *C. parviflorus*. Relatively low growing. Delicate pink flowers and quite small greyish green leaves, slightly rasping to the touch
- *C. x rodiaei* 'Jessabel'. The finest of the deep reddish pink blooms, with dark blotches

Many more could be recommended. Nurseries must always be contacted in advance about availability.

PROPAGATION

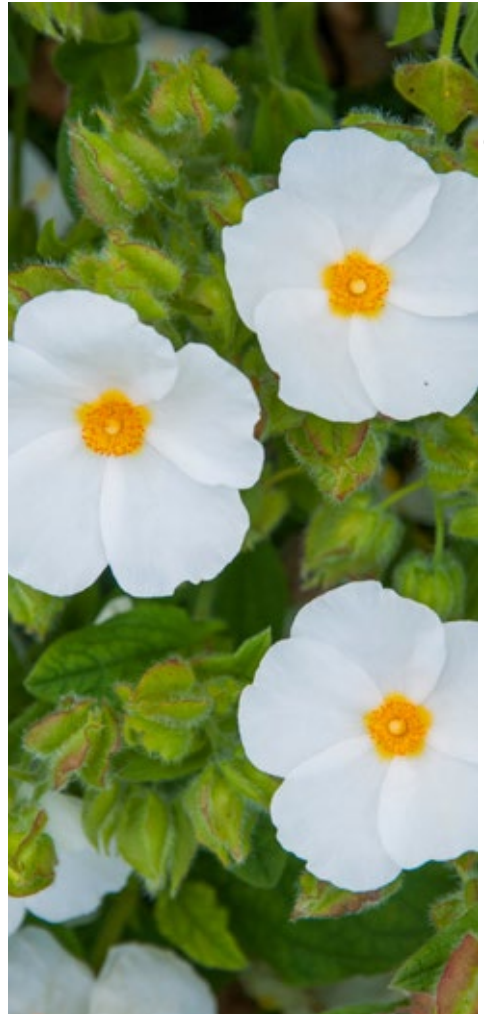
Vegetative (cuttings) or controlled pollination (for new cultivars). In a garden with different species from different locations or sources, identification of plants grown from collected seeds is likely to be problematic: the pollinated plant is of course known, but which species was the pollinator? Backcrosses are also possible.

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Cistus x dansereau 'Jenkyn Place'

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Cistus x laxus 'Snow White'