

Verium News

NEWSLETTER OF THE INTERNATIONAL OLEANDER SOCIETY



September/October 2015

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LAST CALL FOR GOOD NEWS

This is the final newsletter of 2015 and for the first time, *dedicated to our international members*. If you will recall, in our July/August 2015 newsletter Lynette Haaga wrote about our special guest speaker at our Annual Kick-off Luncheon and Festival, Willi Hufnagl founder of Austria's "Oleander Haus". Willi presented to our organization a detailed catalog of 575 oleanders, proposing on-going international collaboration to document and record as many American and European varieties as possible that are not yet part of current literature but known and cultivated by oleander lovers worldwide. Apparently, this presentation spurred international member Mrs. Irmtraud Gotsis to research the history of the oleander in Europe. In the next three pages she questions Dr. Zsuzsanna Varga of the Hungarian Oleander and Mediterranean Plant Association. All of this is made possible by our international interpreter and longtime society member James Nicholas. James was also a guest speaker at our Annual Kick-off Luncheon and Festival.

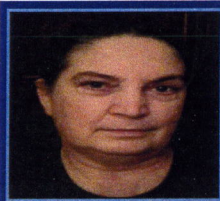
Since this is our final newsletter of the 2015 season I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of our members and sponsors that have helped make this year a most successful one. The year ahead looks most promising thanks to Willi and James for sending and helping us propagate some of the international oleanders, including a pale lavender. While these oleander will not be for sale for a few years we hope to have a blooming exhibit of them at our 2016 Oleander Festival.

Our next meeting is scheduled for **Wednesday, September 30th, Moody Mansion Ground Floor, 26th & Broadway, Business Meeting 9:00am/9:45am, Program 10:00am/11:00am., Guest Speaker: Brenda Lee, Director of 1% To Conserve Galveston Island.** And finally, **The Kewpie Gaido Luncheon and Annual Meeting** probably the most important meeting of the year because we will be electing our officers for 2016 is scheduled for **Wednesday, October 28th, Lasker Inn, 1019-16th Street, 11:30am/1:30pm, \$35.00 Per Person.** Come and enjoy a **Autumn Theme Luncheon** and learn more about the beautification to the entrance to our **Island.** **Guest Speakers: Susanne Sullivan and Brax Underwood**

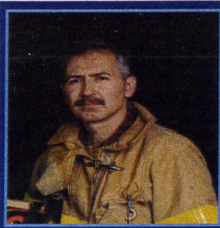
INTERNATIONAL CONVERSATIONIST



Irmtraud Gotsis is renowned among oleander enthusiasts in Europe, and her name is becoming well-known among oleander fans in the United States as well. A self-taught gardener, she was born and raised in Vienna, Austria, but has lived for over three decades in Greece. She has created a series of spectacular new hybrids which, as a tribute to the land of their origin, bear the names of characters from Greek mythology. An absorbing account of her gardening adventures and misadventures appears on the website of the International Oleander Society: <http://oleander.org/special-feature-my-oleander-story-i-gotsis>



Zsuzsanna Varga a native of Hungary, is a veterinary surgeon. Her specialty is the study of bacteria and the specific genes responsible for their pathogenicity. She is a member of the Hungarian Oleander and Mediterranean Plant association, and has been kind enough to share both her scientific and historical expertise in answering some of Mrs. Gotsis' questions regarding the great significance that the oleander has held for centuries in this Central European nation.



Jim Nicholas, is a twenty year IOS member and has been growing oleanders in Connecticut for as many years. He has endeavored for years to build closer connections between the oleander communities of the USA and Europe, and has translated several reference works on oleanders from French, German, and Hungarian into English.



The Oleander in Hungary: Its Past and Present

A conversation between Irmtraud Gotsis and Dr. Zsuzsanna Varga of the Hungarian Oleander and Mediterranean Plant Association (Magyar Leander- és Mediterrán Kertbarát Egyesület) (*Mrs. Gotsis' questions appear in bold italics; Dr. Varga's answers follow*).

1.) Does Hungary have its own oleander literature? Was the oleander a fashionable plant in earlier periods as well?

Yes; we have a cultural/historical book about the flowers of Hungary: A magyarság virágai – The Flowers of the Hungarians, by Raymond Rapaics (1932). He was a professor of botany and wrote or edited numerous books on natural history with the cooperation of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The oleander's presence in Hungary was mentioned for the first time in a book by Ákos Lippay: Pósoni kert virágai (Flowers of the Garden at Poson), printed in Nagyszombat in 1664. Rapaics writes about the oleander that it originated in Italy and came with the Renaissance to Central Europe. Konrad Gesner mentioned it for the first time in Basel [Switzerland] in 1560.

In Hungary it was the flower of the nobles during the Baroque age, but this changed later. It became the flower of the poorest people by the 19th century. You could find it both in the villages and suburbs everywhere in Hungary. According to Rapaics, the reason was its tolerant and undemanding nature regarding its environment, combined with its beauty.

2.) To the best of your knowledge, were there different oleander varieties in Hungary during the "Iron Curtain" period?

Yes, there were a lot of types. I'm absolutely sure, according to my personal experience, that the basic cultivars existed, but without names, just "single white", "red", "pink", "yellow", or "double white"... and fragrant ones also existed.

3.) If there were, had they been imported, or was it possible to import them?

As far as I know, importation was not official. Hungarians had a long tradition of summer holidays at the Croatian seaside. As Yugoslavia was "on the same side" of the curtain, people went there and took home nice cuttings after their holidays. From the seventies onward, every 3 years it was possible to go on tours to Greece, Italy and Spain and even to the Arab countries, with the same outcome. (I have a cutting from my godfather, who took it home from Tunisia.)

4.) Is it possible as well that there exist some remnants from some old nursery (which in the past supplied the parks and the palace gardens of the nobility with plants)?

Given to the past history of oleanders in Hungary, I have to surmise this. Rapaics says that the plants came from the castles to the yards of the peasants and that they were present everywhere in Hungary by the 19th century. In the late eighties and early nineties, well-known international varieties appeared in Hungary, too. For example, there was a lady with an international trucking business and these trucks took home new types for her. She gave cuttings to her friends, too. I can mention my own personal case. I'm 60 now and for as long as I can remember we always had oleanders. My grandmother had a huge fragrant double pink bush; it was always a big problem to place it indoors by winter. Another relative of mine had a double white type which was collected on her Croatian journey before the World War.

5.) As the portrait of Empress "Sisi" has oleanders in the background, it would appear that this was not just by chance. Is it possible that the oleander was very fashionable during this period?

https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elisabeth_von_Österreich-Ungarn#/media/File:Kaiserin_Elisabeth_-_Franz_Xaver_Winterhalter,_1865.jpg

Not only at that time, but even before it, and afterwards, too. I looked in old books and could find the oleander in the county listing of plants from 1868 too. I think that the summer climate in Hungary is nearly perfect for oleanders. We often have long, hot and dry summers, which is ideal for these plants. As they are pot plants here, they are watered regularly and they pay us back with huge amounts of beautiful flowers. They don't need much care, it is easy to grow them, so they are ideal for us to decorate our gardens and terraces.

6.) BECAUSE – the first oleander “treasures” with their various colors only appeared after the Mediterranean type was crossed with the Indian oleander. The “plant hunters” kept their discoveries in various centers, where they later hybridized them. These first unique oleander varieties were often gifts between the European noble families and their relatives.

According to my knowledge of genetics (I'm not a gardener; I work with bacteria), I think that color and shape are multifactorial characteristics of oleanders. Not only the different genes, but environment (pH of soil, polarity, radiation) also affect it. Even considering this, I think that the Mediterranean type was a single pink type flower. (White is not a color, it is the lack of color. The appearance of a white mutant in Crete was only a plant with a "damaged" pink gene.)

I think that you are right regarding the hybridization of Indian and Mediterranean oleanders. I imagine that the Mediterranean type was a geographically separated subspecies with remarkable distinguishing features (single pink flower) and fortunately it remained close enough to the Asian type to have fertile hybrid seeds and descendants. The Asian type was a population with much wider genetic variation, with many different genes which could produce a variety of colors and shapes. (I read that only the Indian ones had fragrance and double or triple corollas. You can see that blue oleanders don't exist. The reason is that different types of genes are responsible for this color which are not present either in the Mediterranean or in the Asian oleanders. You might produce it only with genetic modification, but not through natural hybridization and selection.)

I don't know why, but there are very few scientific studies on oleanders. Sometimes I think that they are treated as weeds and that their only importance is their role as vectors in transmitting various serious plant infections.

7.) They have now been originating in Italian and French nurseries for over 100 years. http://www.plantillustrations.org/species.php?id_species=699756 As an introduction to my own raising of plants from seed here in Greece: In 1982 I planted the first pink oleanders in my garden; they originated from cuttings which I collected from the surrounding area. Important: they were pink oleanders, which may have still been descendants of the wild oleander.

The wild oleander: Why did it spread around the Mediterranean area only in the color pink and with single flowers? This has been documented for 2,000 years. Nowadays, with regard to the Mediterranean Sea, reference is made only to oleanders which have escaped cultivation; thus, the wild oleander no longer exists. It's odd that during the first years, my seedlings only produced pink flowers, and their “parents” were also quite similar. Were they, then, still wild oleanders? Only much later, as I began to receive other cultivars from Europe, did my seedlings exhibit new colors and forms. The PINK GENE” remained present, however; but it conjured up the most diverse hues. In Hungary, however, the pink wild oleander had never existed, therefore the “PINK GENE” didn't have such a strong influence on your crosses. The result has been the “dreamy”, gorgeous new Hungarian varieties, which are unparalleled in Europe!

I mentioned earlier about the Mediterranean wild type oleanders being a geographically closed population with homogeneous genetic material. You can imagine their single pink type flowers as being similar to blond-haired and blue-eyed people. They are different from each other in many aspects, but never produce black-haired and brown-eyed children. (White is a defective pink, like an albino). They would need those genes transmitted from other persons who have them. The Mediterranean oleanders got their new genes for those different characteristics from outside, from the Indian ones, too.

In the Mediterranean basin, selection of oleanders occurs naturally. They grow free and the basis of selection is their surviving and accommodation to the changing environment. In Hungary and in the other Northern countries, selection is made by the persons who grow these plants. If they notice a new color or type, that plant is separated and tracked in its further life. If you ask anybody about oleanders in Hungary, the general answer is: oleanders are sometimes fragrant pink-colored single or double flowers. So, it is the most common in Hungary, too. But we have also had different varieties for a long time, as Lippay was already speaking about apricot-, red-, and white-colored flowers in 1664. It was conscious human selection that made our types so different. The new varieties have a tremendous amount of work in their background: ladies who produce these nice new types say that you can select only 1 or 2 new cultivars from 100 new seedlings, and only 1 out of 500 or even 1000 little plants is a genuinely unique one. The wild single pink Mediterranean type oleander might exist somewhere in distant and closed valleys, far from human influence.

8.) *When, and actually on the basis of what information, did the Hungarians start to occupy themselves with raising oleanders from seed?*

Seed planting occurred occasionally in Hungary, but the epidemic started with Andrea Heyek in the new millennium. She had numerous different oleanders, but she didn't have any white ones. Her friend gave her one and mentioned to her that it developed from the seed of a pale pink plant. Andrea became excited and started to plant her own seeds. The result was unexpected and surprising. From her seeds grew numerous beautiful new types. She had never seen such marvelous oleanders before. She reported about her experience on the "Leander a híres" internet forum, and the seed planting epidemic broke out.

9.) *By the way: How did it happen that so many people became interested in raising oleanders from seed? Apologies; I never would have guessed that there was such strong enthusiasm in Hungary!*

I think that this enthusiasm for oleander seedlings grew out of the general popularity of oleanders in Hungary. With the help of internet forums, many people saw the beautiful nice varieties and wished to produce their own, too. There were occasional seedling productions with successful outcomes like "Csömöri szépség" even before this epidemic, but it became so popular because of the internet forum "Leander a híres", where Andrea Heyek reported about her successful seed growing and nice new varieties. More and more people joined the forum (by now it has nearly 90,000 comments by more than 1000 persons). Since that time new forums, Facebook pages and private homepages have been showing more and more new cultivars. Collecting, registering and grouping of these new variants is a stated goal of the Hungarian Oleander and Mediterranean Plant Association.

A link to the website of the Hungarian Oleander and Mediterranean Plant Association: <http://leanderegyesulet.hu/>

All of the Greek oleander photos are the property and courtesy of Mrs. Gotsis and can be viewed on the "Oleander Haus" website

