



Kastellorizo's main harbour, Limani, looking east towards Turkey, only two kilometres away. The belt of pines (Pinus brutia) can be seen where it meets the township from the eastern slopes of the island.

BIG LIFE ON TINY MEGISTI

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"Hope your road is a long one.
May there be many summer mornings when,
with what pleasure, what joy,
you enter harbours you're seeing for the first time".
From Constantine Cavafy, *Ithaka*, 1911.

There is an island in the far eastern Aegean called Kastellorizo, or Megisti, the latter name meaning 'biggest' in ancient Greek. Although just over nine square kilometres in area and 19.5 kilometres in perimeter, Kastellorizo is the biggest of a 15-islet archipelago at the easternmost corner of the Greek Aegean, on the border of Europe and Turkey. Kastellorizo is

one of the poet Cavafy's harbours – ancient and mysterious – so enchanting that every time you enter the main harbour it does indeed feel as if you are seeing it for the first time.

The island's main harbour, Limani, is one of the finest deepwater harbours in the Aegean, a significant trading port since ancient times and deep enough to dock the Greek naval destroyers that patrol the country's eastern borders. Her second harbour, the shallow-watered Mandraki, is an ancient shelter for boat builders and the original smugglers' cove for the island; it is still used to dry dock caiques in winter and has foundations from antiquity running along its seabed. Kastellorizo is also blessed with an ocean grotto, the Fokiale Cave, so blue and cavernous that it was allegedly declared better than the Blue Grotto of Capri by no less than the King of Italy, Vittorio Emanuele III, on his visit to the island in 1929 (Pappas, 1994). Kastellorizo hosts two of the Mediterranean's threatened sea species, the



A patitiri (treading place), one of more than 47 dotted across Kastellorizo from when it was fertile with vines in the 6th century BC.

loggerhead turtle (*Caretta caretta*) and the Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*). But Kastellorizo's pleasures and joys are to be found not just in its harbours, but also in its tiny and resilient microcosm of flora.

This island might seem a terrifying prospect from a gardener's point of view, being largely formed of rock with no natural water sources. There is barely any arable land other than some red-earthed ancient *stremmata* (1,000 square metre blocks) atop the mountain and scrapings in the rocky escarpment, all devoid of any source of water other than the occasional rains. The island survives on the desalination of seawater, as well as on fresh water shipped regularly from its closest Greek neighbour, the island of Rhodes, some 110 kilometres to the north-west. In the years before the late 20th century, cisterns under houses and a system of larger communal cisterns stored the island's rainwater. You can imagine, then and now, that there is little water to spill liberally in a garden each day.

Why does this all matter? Without any natural water sources, the plant life beyond the watering cans of the homes that ring the harbour is entirely reliant on rain, condensation and any natural humidity, nothing else, making Kastellorizo an entirely natural 'dry garden'.

Yet Kastellorizo was not always a scorched rock. Wine presses or *patitiria* carved into the stone, scattered across the rocky peaks of the island, attest to a time around the 6th century BC when it was laced with vineyards (Ashton, 1995), an early warning, perhaps, of the impact of climate change. These presses were for treading the juice from grapes and their must to produce wines and spirits. The undulating dusty peaks, where jagged white limestone rocks are stained by red earth, choked by the spiky hexagonal cages of *Euphorbia acanthothamnos* (Greek spiny spurge), are grazed now by free-ranging goats and home to pheasants and scorpions, with the only gardening activities

being undertaken in the few walled gardens of small private plots and churches. Some have tried to establish modest olive groves but these are heavily tested in the long summers by the heat and dryness. An attempt by the island to establish a large water reservoir alongside the airstrip remains incomplete, like many Greek infrastructure projects. It now sits an open and empty concrete bunker subject to ongoing conflicts over the actual ownership of the land and the legality of its compulsory acquisition (Vrouhos, 2025).

Though conditions are harsh, the island boasts a lively and flourishing natural environment, which is no surprise to a Mediterranean gardener. A plant collection and survey undertaken by Elli Stamatiadou and Werner Greuter between 1973 and 1974 catalogued 424 species across Megisti, Rho, Strongyli and the other tiny islets, with four new taxa identified (Grouter, 1979), a number now extended to 477 and expected to exceed 500 with more extensive cross-seasonal sampling (Constantinidis, 2013). The location of Kastellorizo, two kilometres opposite the Turkish town of Kaş (the ancient Lycian city of Antiphellos), means that its Mediterranean flora is closely related to that of both Greece and Antalya in Turkey. "Perhaps the most remarkable floristic aspect of the islands is the abundance of W. Anatolian or local E. Mediterranean elements that are otherwise very rare in the Greek flora," states Constantinidis (p. 83).

Interestingly, in her groundbreaking book *Making a Garden on a Greek Hillside*, Jaqueline Tyrwhitt (1998) mentions the island of Kastellorizo three times as the source of some of her plants. She first mentions the island in her October entry on *Colchicum* (autumn crocus) as the source of her *Colchicum macrophyllum*, noting that Kastellorizo "really has an Asia Minor flora." Tyrwhitt's next mention of Kastellorizo is in November, as being the source of the corms of *Colchicum*

cupanii (Mediterranean meadow saffron), which flower earlier on the island than they do in Attica. In the same month she mentions Kastellorizo as being the source of her *Galanthus cilicicus* (snowdrops) at Sparoza, collected from the island as bulbs in 1974. Once again, in her short comments, Tyrwhitt observes that, "they are the first snowdrops to flower and are distinguished by having no basal green splotch on their petals." Plants from a far-flung micro-cosmos in the eastern Aegean may be expected to be a little out of time with their relatives elsewhere. Snowdrops highlight the exotic nature of such harsh conditions, surviving unwatered and unloved other than by the nurture of nature herself, to reappear above ground when conditions are favourable.

Both patient and virulent Mediterranean species inhabit the stone shells of houses bombed by the Luftwaffe in World War II and burned by the English to mask their looting after the Kastellorizians were evacuated to British internment camps in Egypt and what is now Palestine, in camps like Nuseirat. In an island whose population at the turn of the 20th century was some 10,000 people, only 400 to 500 remain, the rest having migrated across the world to become part of the Panhellenic diaspora in Australia, the USA, Canada, the UK, Europe and South America, among many other places. Like their indigenous Mediterranean plants, Kastellorizians remaining on the island make good lives amongst the fallen stone walls of their neo-classical homes, cracked cisterns and broken stairways.

A small fortress sits on the promontory, once known as Castel Rosso, or Red Castle, built in the time of the Knights Hospitaller in the 1380s, and from which the island derives its names, Castelrosso and later Kastellorizo (Pappas, 1994). The only work this fortress has now is to shade a cliff-ledge of spindly maquis under which the goats rest in the late evening, to provide a navigation point for yachts, and most importantly, to fly the Greek flag.

The natural environment of Kastellorizo is immediately entwined with the town as there is less of the industrial desolation that comes with larger Greek cities where nature is suffocated, though it still occurs at the micro scale. The stretch of condemned houses running to the beach at Mandraki is a crumbling case in point, ruined by a lazy builder who used saltwater in the concrete mix.



The stunning crocus growing on Kastellorizo in September, *Colchicum macrophyllum*, which the famous gardener, Jaqueline Tyrwhitt - founder of the Sparoza garden in Athens - notes as being a unique species of the Asia Minor flora of the region. Photo by the author.

An ancient skirt of *Pinus brutia* forest (Turkish or Calabrian pine) rises up the ravine behind the town, facing east, protected from the unforgiving western sun. This small forest has its own microcosm of flora and fauna. A path of 400 stairs winds steeply up the cliffside beside these pines, the number of steps commemorating the years under Ottoman occupation. This stairway passes many floral surprises growing from the rockface in different seasons, a vibrant example being the dusty pink flowers of a *Convolvulus elegantissimus* or Elegant Bindweed in summer (Atchley, 1938, also noted in Greuter's 1979 survey of the island).

In some places, the small stone squares and paths between the tightly packed pastel houses smell of chamomile (*Chamomilla recutita*) as it crawls across the cracks seeking sun, releasing its healing scent into the air as the day warms. The delightful explosion of white and purple that is the caper flower (*Capparis*

A lucky find of capers (*Capparis spinosa*) in springtime bloom.





Typical across Kastellorizo, capers (*Capparis spinosa*) bursting from cracks in walls and stairs.

spinosa) is another summer delight on Kastellorizo, springing from cracks and fissures between the tightly clustered houses. Tyrwhitt (1998) notes that “the caper has spectacular flowers that last only a day,” making each flower a small miracle. Left to their own devices on the island, the capers grow freely with lovely round leaves and plump berries that are both pickled for condiments at the most authentic local restaurants and are a staple of the local larder.

Pomegranates (*Punica granatum*) grow across Kastellorizo, often among the ruined walls of old houses where they are undisturbed as they throw out their blushing fruit in the summer. Tyrwhitt (1998) notes that the pomegranate is a native of south-west Asia, “but has become widely naturalised in Greece.” Pomegranates grow happily despite their complete neglect on the island. Figs (*Ficus carica*) similarly grow happily in roofless ruins, open to the blue sky, some growing to fill the entire two-storey shells of former captains’ houses with their lavish green foliage. Their leaves offer the perfect shade for a cat to sleep under.

When I first read the description of phrygana in Tyrwhitt’s book, it was an epiphany. I finally had a word that captures the incredible rolling natural landscape peppered with wild herbs and thorny bushes, aromatic and floral, home to hidden bulbs which surprise us when they emerge after the rains begin. In Kastellorizo, as in much of Greece, thyme (*Thymbra capitata*) grows wild in the phrygana, as does rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) – with the dry atmosphere and the salty scent of the sea, they lend to the soft and blended aroma that is Mediterranean air.

A species we have spotted by the swimming platforms in Mandraki is *Salsola soda* (also known as *agretti* in Italy and *almyra* in Greece), a seasonal seaside delicacy that is enjoyed steamed, with lemon and olive oil, and has the texture of a soft seaweed. You may have had this in tavernas on the Athenian Riviera. The fact that it grows wild in the tiny world of Kastellorizo attests to the diversity of this island’s natural environment. Apparently, *almyra* has also been found along the edge of the sea leading to the island’s power plant (Constantinidis, 2013).

This ‘big’ microcosm of plants on tiny Megisti is a profound testament to the resilience and diversity of the Mediterranean landscape. Kastellorizo is one of the special places in Greece that witnesses such flourishing, a true Ithaka.

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www.mediterraneangardensociety.org

Kastellorizo Crossword Challenge No. 2

Readers of Filia may find the second crossword in our series more challenging than the first. This is the intention. While some of the answers may be deduced from interconnecting words, most of the answers have appeared in articles in recent editions of Filia. Happy thinking!

Across

5. The first name of the wife of Kastellorizo's great benefactor after whom the school is named.
7. The original name of British Airways when Kastellorizo was a stopover on routes to the Near & Far East (two words)
8. The surname of the great benefactor of Kastellorizo's first school.
12. The town in Anatolia where St Nicholas was buried.
14. The saint to whom the recently constructed chapel on Strongyli is dedicated.
15. The slippers worn by women as part of the traditional Kastellorizian bridal outfit.
19. Kastellorizo's highest peak.
20. The fuel depot on the western side of the harbour now used as a sculptor's studio.
21. The surname of the last French governor of Kastellorizo.
22. The first name of the long serving priest of Kastellorizo who died in 1929 and lies buried at the Monastery of Ayia Triadha.
23. The modern name for Antifilo (or ancient Antiphellos).
26. The marital surname of Despina 'Kyra tis Rho'.
28. The original Greek name for the coastal town of Fethiye.
29. The surname of Kastellorizo's current mayor.
30. The Venetian admiral who bombarded the castle in the 17th century.

The X-Word challenge is produced by Nicholas Pappas.

Down

1. The surname of the Australian politician who advocated at the UN for Kastellorizo to be united with Greece.
2. The broad inlet on Kastellorizo's west coast used by mariners as shelter from storms.
3. The surname of the Greek pirate who served with the Russian navy in offensives against the Ottomans in the late 18th century.
4. The surname of the Greek politician who was born on Kastellorizo and formed his own political party in 1976.
6. The saint after whom the church adjoining the church of St Nicholas on Kavos is dedicated.
9. The surname of Kastellorizo's provisional Greek governor between February - December 1915.
10. The rocky outcrop lying between the islets of Psoradhia and Psomi.
11. The ship that connected Kastellorizo to Rhodes in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.
13. The islet between Rho and Kastellorizo used by the Kastellorizians for lime production in the 19th century.
16. The saint to whom the small church near the entrance to Kastellorizo's cemetery is dedicated.
17. The sash worn by women as part of the traditional Kastellorizian bridal outfit.
18. The surname of the Greek bureaucrat who supported the islanders' calls for union with Greece between 1912-1913.
24. The name of the main square in the abandoned town of Livisi.
25. The exclusive Athenian private school named after its Kastellorizian founder.
27. The locality where the island's schools and cathedral are located.



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