

Have You Ever Thought Of Going To Turkey?

By 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 going to Turkey was, I wanted a diploid form of *Iris danfordiae* for hybridizing. The commercial form is a triploid and thus is sterile.¹

Once I realized I would have to go to Turkey if I wanted to collect *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 four species at a given site), Tulips, Fritillarias, of course lots of Muscari, and a multitude of other bulbs. As well, there are Primulas, and low and behold, on the latest trip I even found a peony.

It didn't take any more convincing, I wanted to go to Turkey. And go I did, for three weeks in each of 1985 and 1986. In both cases I went in late Spring. This allowed me to see some Iris in bloom, and 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 Gladiolus just starting to bloom, but their corms were only just beginning to regenerate. I doubted they would survive the three to four weeks till they were replanted in Canada. However I collected a couple of corms 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 2 1/2 weeks in the hot car until its time to go home. But a little common sense (a plastic bag) made all the difference. The plant survived the trip home and gave lovely bloom this past Spring.

Talking about adventures, I'm glad to say I did find *Iris danfordiae*. Out of four 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. Though 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.

That special day began with me just over 300km from the site. Because of *danfordiae*'s importance, I decided to put the whole day towards finding it. This meant giving up going on side trips to find Junos; which I felt fairly confident of finding. My feelings towards 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 confident. Even though I had done a lot of research before the trip, there had been many cases where I had an exact kilometer-age to find something, but for the life of me, I couldn't find it. On the opposite spectrum, some vague references proved easy to find.

The difficulties are due to a number of reasons. One is that the site is possibly an old one. Man, in his infinite wisdom, has destroyed the site since it was recorded to make way for a farm field, a vineyard, or a house. Another is that the site is not near the road, but actually several hundred feet or more from it. It may be that the bulbs are only on a small segment of the site thus you find them only if you're lucky. In a similar sense, they may only be on one side of a hill or mountain pass.

After arriving in the area, I had a bite of lunch, then rested for half an hour. During this time I was wondering how I could salvage the rest of the day. I didn't have much hope of finding *danfordiae* and was wondering what I could look for instead.

But no, *danfordiae* was the main reason I went to Turkey. I hadn't yet found it, and this was my last chance. Regardless of how unlikely I thought I'd find it, I was going to try.

Off I went, stopping at a gas station to see if they could tell me where the town was. It turned out to be ~25km along a dirt road.

There were two other villages along the road. At the first I almost turned back. I had hoped there'd be a road leading up into the mountains where I could try to look for *danfordiae*, but there wasn't. The road only headed further up the valley to the next village. Little did I know that within 2 hours, it would be back at the first village that I'd be finding *danfordiae*. But that was still to come.

Determination set in. *Danfordiae* was what I came for; *danfordiae* was what I was going to look for. So on I went.

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 find someone to help look for *danfordiae*. I should point out that my understanding of Turkish is very limited, but I managed fairly well.

No better place to go than the local tea (çay) house.²

¹ It is especially interesting to realize that the commercial *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.

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 plowed. It was in this area that we found a Juno, which should be *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 *pamphylica* got passed around. From what I could make out we weren't getting too far.

Back in the car we got, and off we went to the first village. Again we headed straight for the teahouse. By this time the bulb of *pamphylica* had gotten quite battered from all of its examinations, but it served its purpose well. It didn't seem we were getting very far 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 Retic! 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 *danfordiae*.³

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.

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

The site for *danfordiae* proved to be quite different from what I expected. It was a 60' rock cliff with pockets of soil. Growing with the *danfordiae* were Muscari and grass. There were a lot of *danfordiae* bulbs; they seemed smallish. I found quite a few with seedpods - 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 *danfordiae* I was able to collect a lot of other Iris. Experience teaches you a lot. I was quite interested to find three sites for Spuria iris along the same route I had gone on the first trip. On that trip, I hadn't yet found any Spurias, so I didn't know how to recognize 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. I was amazed on the first trip at the amount of *pseudocaucausica* 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 was in the wild, I would have thought it should be as available as *aucheri*. I haven't heard any comments about it being difficult to grow; as *persica* is well known for being.

I only wish Reticulatas were as easy to find. I did find several sites for them, but they did seem fairly elusive. I felt really lucky to have stumbled upon some sites that had not been previously recorded. One grassy slope looked just like another (and it wasn't always a grassy slope where the Retics were found). Twice on the first trip I only found one bulb. Further hunting in those same areas on the second trip proved fruitless.

Overall, what was most fascinating, was to see where the Iris were growing. In effect, to see how the Iris 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 one side of a hill was being farmed, and the other had some Iris.

Much of the land in Turkey is grazed; especially in eastern Turkey. As a result of overgrazing, the land is fairly barren. The effects of the grazing shows up in the Iris: Junos and *Oncocyclus* Iris are very short in height. Often even their short leaves show signs of having their tips eaten. And this happens to the flowers as well.

If you are lucky enough ever to go to Turkey I think you'll be most impressed with the scenery. It keeps changing. There are remarkable changes even within 100km, from snow capped mountains, to narrow gorges, to flat plains, from cultivated farm land, to grazed land with only sparse vegetation, to scrub oak, to forests of pine trees. Quite fascinating to say the least. I'd certainly advise you to take along a lot of film.

One other quite striking thing is seeing many homes with televisions; especially in eastern Turkey. The tell-tale sign being the TV aerials. You say, what's so special about that. Most homes in Britain, Canada, the U.S., etc. have a TV. The difference is that the homes I'm thinking of in Turkey are built of stone and cement. The furnishings are fairly spartan, by our standard, relatively primitive. These are people earning \$97 U.S. per month or less.

The average Turk is quite friendly. I've found them to be very helpful on many occasions, an important factor in making the trip enjoyable. But a word of caution: avoid military installations, of which there are many, and above all, avoid the gypsies.

If there are gypsies near where you want to do some collecting, DON'T. Before you know it they can have your car doors open and no end of trouble! But, as I said before, the average Turk is quite friendly.

² Çay houses are an institution in Turkey nowadays. Only very, 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.

³ One bulb bloomed in 1986. It was indeed *danfordiae*. I don't know if the bloom was typical. It was 1" in diameter and noticeably smaller than the commercial *danfordiae*.

As anywhere, if you do go plant collecting, restrain yourself from taking many plants. In general three should be plenty. If many collectors go to the same sites, in no time those sites will be wiped out. Its 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 with it having 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 to really appreciate what I would say, is to go there yourself and experience it first hand.

You might be interested that on the first trip I traveled alone. On the second trip my wife came along. It's a little nicer, as you might imagine, traveling in a foreign country with a companion.

Now, if only it was 20 years ago, when people like Paul Furse were traveling 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...

Alan lives in Toronto, Canada. In 1978 he graduated in electrical engineering at the University of Toronto. Since that time he has been managing the development of computer application software for Ontario Hydro, a provincial electrical utility. Partly as a result of working in an office all day, Alan developed a keen interest in gardening. His main interest is Iris, although he is quite interested in bulbs as well; from crocus to Erythroniums, to Narcissus, etc. He says that, "Iris are so fascinating because of all the different types, from Arils, which want desert-like conditions, to Dwarfs and Tall Bearded, that are very easy to grow, to Japanese and Louisianas, which want moist conditions, etc. And then there is the fun of hybridizing, including intercrossing some of the different types."

Many, but not all, of the bulbs Alan collected in Turkey have now bloomed. It has been quite fascinating to see the results in terms of what colours the flowers actually are; particularly for some of the Reticulata and Juno iris. Alan has done a lot of hybridizing with *Iris danfordiae* and has gotten seeds from it both as a pod parent, and as a pollen parent. The only unfortunate thing is that he estimates it will be at least another 3 years before he starts to see the results of that work. He expects some interesting results because of the colours of the parents which were used along with *danfordiae* (i.e. not just the typical blue, and reddish-purples).

Alan and his wife Lynda are expecting their first child in early October 1988.