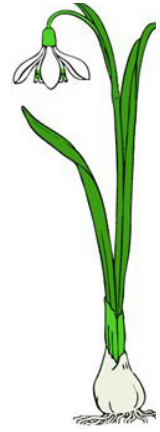


Hunting the Wild Galanthus in the Republic of Georgia



by Barbara Tiffany

I FELT AS IF I HAD MADE THE BIG TIME when the director of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden asked if he could bring high-level members to see my garden in July 2011.

Among the guests were the director and deputy director of the National Botanic Garden of the Republic of Georgia. The director Nukri Sikharulidze was elegant, scholarly, reserved. The deputy director, David Kikodze, sported a Yankees baseball cap and was energetic and enthusiastic. They were a perfect team.

It is a great pleasure and a big job to lead 40 people through my garden. The more interested they are, the more it is like herding cats. And I am easily distracted when someone wants to talk about a plant—any plant.

When David came bounding up to me, exclaiming over my collection of galanthus, I was mystified—how had he found galanthus in July? In my garden, galanthus are naturalized on a south-facing slope, and, in another area, planted in arched rows behind a bench (because they were being smothered by the vigorous root masses of rhodea, hosta, and *Disporopsis pernyi*). I never thought anyone would see the little

tombstones (labels) in this galanthus library. Being a scientist, David had peeked into and behind everything. Who knew he is an international expert on galanthus?

“You really should come to Georgia and go with me into the Caucasus Mountains, botanizing for galanthus,” he said.

“Oh,” I responded in my best casual manner,

“and when would one do that?”

“In early March,” he responded.

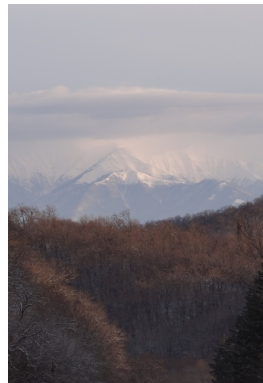
Playing hard-to-get, I said, “Lovely, we will be there.”

Then I had to break the news to my husband, who is neither a galanthophile nor a gardener.

The leadership of the Garden (NBGG) has changed: Nukri is now the director of the Institute of Botanical Research; David is his deputy director; and

a woman named Maia Tavartkiladze has taken the helm. She was gracious beyond imagination, shepherding the visit of people she had never met.

And so, three weeks before we were to depart, when Maia wrote that



Morning light on the Caucasus Mountains.

photo ©H. R. Tiffany

she wanted me to give a presentation about my garden to her staff and the architects from City Hall who were planning extensive renovations of the Garden, I could only gasp.

Oh, well, I needed only to sift through 10,000 photographs (darn this digital age), because I certainly could talk about my garden. But how to make a private collection

garden in the horticultural hotbed of America’s East Coast relevant to a staff of about 70 scientists from the Soviet era? Our nine-hour layover in Prague started to look like a happy chunk of time during which I could invent some connection.

We are headed for a country in which advanced techniques of ironmaking and goldsmithing were practiced as far back as the seventh century BC. This was the country in which Jason sought the Golden Fleece; where ancient Greeks went on holiday.

A little more than half the size of Pennsylvania, Georgia has been invaded, occupied, and sucked dry by every neighbor, and even some who aren’t neighbors



View from the National Botanic Garden of Mother Georgia, offering a bowl of wine and protecting her people with her sword.

photo ©H. R. Tiffany



at all. From the Mongols, Afghans, Persians, and Turks to the Russians, who annexed Georgia at the beginning of the turn of the nineteenth century, Georgia has endured a laborious history of ownership by others.

In addition to being a crossroad between East and West, this beautiful country is like a woman too pretty for her own good. Georgia enjoys a climate that stretches from subtropical to the eternal cold of 16,000' mountain peaks, and vast stretches of fertile plains and semi-arid deserts, as well as 196 miles of shoreline on the Black Sea. This range hosts a commanding diversity of plant life. This small country of 26,500 square miles is home to 4,200 plant species, including ten species of galanthus, three of which are endemic to Georgia (*G. schaoricus*, *G. ketzkhoveli*, and *G. kemulariae*).

Georgia is not easy to get to. Flights are infrequent, inconvenient, and very long. We landed in Tbilisi, the capitol, at 4:30 A.M. Even at that hour, it is remarkable. In the cleft formed by the Mtkvari River, Tbilisi is a honey-colored city with red tile roofs and approximately 50 Georgian Orthodox churches. Our



Tbilisi

friends tell us with great pride that in many neighborhoods Judaism, Roman Catholicism, Islam, Greek and Russian Orthodoxy, and the Armenian Apostolic Church have coexisted peacefully with the Georgian Orthodox Church for millennia.

Evidence of gentrification is everywhere, as charming second-floor balconies are being restored on centuries-old buildings, streets are being recobbled, and everything sports a new coat of paint.

Handsome new government buildings are wrapped in undulating glass to articulate their official policy of transparency.

President Mikheil Saakashvili has decreed that when a citizen needs a document, one should be able to go to one agency, pay the fee, present the receipt at the office that issues the document, and receive the papers needed within two hours. Surprisingly, this was almost our experience: my phytosanitary certificates were issued in fifty-five minutes! President Saakashvili has effectively

eliminated bureaucratic graft that was rampant in Georgia under Russian occupation.

David and Maia had organized an amazing tour for us, which included visits to historical monuments and exquisite, genuinely moving churches (several as early as the sixth century), and treacherous climbs into remote archaeological wonders. But this is a tale of the Hunt for the Wild Galanthus. Five days of our visit were organized forays into galanthus territory with David.

Our first destination was 2½ hours to Ozaani in East Georgia, bordering Azerbaijan. We drove around the countryside through stream washes, up and down small trails, stopping as many times to ask directions from a local as we saw them. Eventually the four-wheel-drive van stopped on a deeply rutted, iced-over road and David said, regretfully, “We walk from here.” Our destination was 1.8 miles uphill. I started out and simply could not navigate the icy, foot-high troughs. Tiff, David, and a collector for the National Botanical Institute set off. I slept for three hours in the van!



Approach to Zedazeni does not look ripe for snowdrops!

photo ©H. R. Tiffany

I was even sadder not to have made that first foray when I saw Tiff’s pictures of the sixth century church, its frescoes, and clumps of *G. lagodechianus*, a species which grows only in Eastern Georgia, on the south-facing slopes below the church.

David reassured me that our next destination was in the valley below where, hopefully, the snow would have melted.

Lagodekhi Nature Reserve (a grand, still very wild preserve established as a hunting park in 1912 on the border of Azerbaijan), is where we saw *G. lagodechianus* growing in *locus classicus* (where the species was first described and collected).

It was one of only two places we visited that galanthus was not snowed under. Like our area, Georgia experienced very unusual weather patterns, but exactly opposite—uncharted low temperatures and record snowfall in early March. Everyone apologized for what they had no control over, and in most places all we could see was galanthus at melting edges, rather than the acres of white blossoms that lay underneath.

Our next botanizing was ten miles south of Tbilisi, looking for *G. alpinus*. We gained so much altitude, the ground was again covered with snow. All

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We welcome all contributions. Contact Barbara Bricks, bcubed32@aol.com.

we could see was an occasional open patch along the road, with a plant or two in wasted bloom. Not enough for the untrained eye to distinguish the species differences.

G. kemulariae is endemic to Georgia, and may be found at Zedazeni, a working monastery from the seventh century, northwest of Tbilisi. At 4,500', the monastery and the warm and smoky active church sit in the shadow of a curious giant cross—200' of lacy metal struts which was actually a communications tower! And everything was sheeted over in ice. We did find one blossom of *G. kemulariae* frozen in momentary preservation.



Barbara and "prodders" on sheep trail 200' above the road!

photo ©H. R. Tiffany

Our last foray was a three-day excursion west to Batumi. Only one road, carved through the mountains, links Tbilisi with this subtropical resort city on the Black Sea. Snow started as we left Tbilisi and, by the time we reached the tunnel at 7,000', oncoming traffic was at a standstill. Miraculously, our lane of traffic inched along and we

got through just before the road was closed for the day. A trip of 250 miles, usually a six-hour drive, took over nine hours.

Next day, we drove from Batumi through a romantic landscape of steep hills and waterfalls. When they explained that we were going to walk up that rocky face, I thought, "Not this girl." Too terrified to protest, trying desperately to be a 'good sport' kind of American, I made it up along a sheep trail, with three pushers and prodders, over icy patches to see really lovely *Galanthus alpinus* var. *alpinus*, cyclamen, primula, and ferns clinging for dear life (as I was) to the dripping rock wall.

Mercifully *after* our climb, David showed us the site along the road overlooking the Turkish border where, during a botanical conference in the area, a renowned Russian scientist, botanizing with David, was so busy photographing on these steep slopes that he fell to his death.

Next quarry in the Ajara-Batumi area, we found *G. rizehensis*, unique for leaves with a thin white median line.

We were behind a couple of kids in a Russian Lada, traveling up another canyon, when it became apparent that their car could not make it through the drifts. Our guys spun this little vehicle around and pushed it to the very edge of the cliff, so others could pass.

The boys climbed in with several



Galanthus kemulariae

photo ©David Kikodze



Galanthus krasnovii

photo ©David Kikodze



Galanthus lagodechianus

photo ©David Kikodze



Galanthus rizehensis

photo ©David Kikodze



Galanthus schaaricus

photo ©David Kikodze

American Sources for Galanthus

Carolyn's Shade Gardens

325 S. Roberts Rd
Bryn Mawr, PA 19010
610-525-4664
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Carolyn is building her already excellent offerings by teaming up with local collectors.

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Send \$3 for a catalog of Proprietor Hitch Lyman's offerings from his extensive collection.

A disclaimer: It would be absolutely ridiculous to suggest that galanthophiles are normal plant collectors (if there is such a thing as a "normal" plant collector). This is a very dangerous genus. For no apparent reason, people lose their minds over these tiny things. Proceed with caution.

—Barbara Tiffany



photo ©H. R. Tiffany

David photographing great sweeps of *Galanthus woronowii*.

50-lb sacks of flour they were trying to deliver to their snowbound village. Driving them up the mountain, we felt pretty smug as we waved goodbye. Half an hour later, we reached the site of the very rare *G. krasnovii*. Snowcover: 2'. Smugness: gone.

In this area of Ajara, we could find *G. krasnovii*. It is known only here and in a few sites in the breakaway province of Abkhazia and in northeastern Turkey. David and his colleague from the Batumi Botanic Garden decided that since the site was even higher and more remote, it was simply too early in this



photo ©David Kikodze

Galanthus woronowii

unusual season to see the plants, even if they were not under snow.

The last visit on our program was to see the Batumi Botanic Garden, with gorgeous views of the Black Sea and acres of *G. woronowii*. This snowdrop grows enthusiastically around Ajara, and it is also found in a few locations in eastern Georgia around Tbilisi. Georgia exports 15 million *G. woronowii* annually to Turkey for reexport to Holland.

When asked why they are not sold directly to Holland for an assumed higher price, David says wistfully, "This is a country of eaters, not

entrepreneurs."

On our return to Tbilisi, we were scheduled to see *G. schaoricus*, a giant galanthus with very large leaves, endemic to Georgia. Could we possibly see it in bloom in these unusual weather conditions? Could we see it at all? Not a chance.

I secured our phytosanitary certificate the last day with Maia, who gifted us from the NBGG's own collections with the species we had been unable to find.

Exhausted but happy, excited, and secure (armed with knowledge gleaned from many calls to the USDA nailing down procedures, CITES certificates, the phytosanitary, my own USDA Import Permit, and a letter from Maia, stating that I had been gifted with these bulbs for scientific research), we actually were on time for our 4:30 A.M. flight.

After traveling 20 hours, we landed at JFK, declared our diminutive cargo, and trotted dutifully over to the Plant Inspection Desk. I was hopeful my precious bulbs were homeward bound. After hours of discussion the agents declined to pass on 130 bulbs. They would have to deliver them to the USDA, which was closed Friday at 4:30, reopening next Monday.

One week of phone calls later: The bulbs will probably either be returned to Georgia, or go to 'Plant Rescue' where they will "spend the rest of their days" (read, "be tossed.") The reason: my CITES certificates were not signed by Georgian Customs Agents as we left the country (at 3:30 A.M.).

It's painful. So much time, effort, money went into this trip. And my motivation was clearly to secure these rare bulbs, even with their admittedly subtle differences.

Curiously, it doesn't seem to matter so much now. My much greater loss is the daily intercourse with our new friends. Both Tiff and I genuinely miss

these special human beings and their extraordinary country.

Is it about finding the problems suffered by the National Botanical Garden from years of Russian occupation more intriguing than the problems of my own garden; were we just intrigued with the long and beleaguered history of a truly gorgeous sliver of a country; or captivated by the open, generous nature of its people? Perhaps it's about making a

connection, a genuine connection, in a world where a Facebook entry passes as a relationship. Perhaps there's a kind of reassurance in learning that strangers on the other side of the world are just like us. Really.

And then there is the joy of passions shared: extraordinary

hospitality (wonderful food, great wine) and quality time with people who are even crazier than I am about plants.

Admitted plantaholic, Barbara Tiffany gardens



on the steep, rocky slopes of The Tohickon Creek in Point Pleasant, Bucks County, PA, with husband Robert (Tiff), resident photographer and all-round good sport.

Ed Note: Clip art from FreeClipartNow.com. For a full-color version of this article, go to the HPS/MAG web site, www.hardyplant.org.

Medicinal Use

Galanthus woronowii has some interesting medical properties; the alkaloid known as galanthamine, first studied in modern medicine in the Soviet Union in the 1950s, has been shown to be a treatment for motor and sensory dysfunctions associated with disorders of the central nervous system. The UK National Institute of Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) now recommends galanthamine for treating moderate Alzheimer's disease.

—*The Medicinal Plant Collection*, cited in the Jan. 2011 On-line Bulletin of the Friends of Oxford Botanic Garden.