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The Julia and Alexander N. Diomedes Botanic Garden: a genealogical tree and a botanic garden

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Next time you cross the busy street known as the **Iera Odos**, take time to notice the alcove at number 401, marked by simple stonework. This is the entrance to the Julia and Alexander N. Diomedes Botanic Garden, which boasts over 3,000 varieties of plants. It is the largest botanical garden in Greece, covering approximately 460 acres in the area of Haidari, of which almost 50 have been dedicated to the cultivation and development of plants.

The Diomedes Botanic Garden contributes to the maintenance of plant biodiversity

and gives shape to one edge of the city of Athens, acting as an oasis for Western Attica. Among its aims are the promotion of scientific research through the study, cultivation and preservation of Greek flora in all its richness. At the same time, the Garden is an asset to university teaching in areas of Botanic and Environmental studies, and provides a wealth of material for undergraduate and graduate theses, as well as doctoral dissertations.

Alexander N. Diomedes (1875-1950) was one of the Great Patrons of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (NKUA). In the Proceedings of the 12th Senate Meeting of the NKUA (12/12/1950) it is recorded that Diomedes “bequeathed to the University his residence located at 18 Rigillis Street and a significant number of bonds for the specific purpose of the establishment near Athens of a Botanic Garden which would bear the name Julia and Alexander Diomedes Botanic Garden and be used for educational purposes by the University and other bodies, through experimental and other forms of study, for the propagation, cultivation, development and appreciation among the younger generations of the world of plants, trees and flowers.”

The Julia and Alexander Diomedes Botanic Garden **belongs to the charitable foundation of that name, which was founded in 1951** thanks to the bequest of Alexander N. Diomedes. The Garden opened its doors to the public in 1975, once the administration was set in place, the space designed, planting implemented, and flora established.

The lives of Alexander Diomedes’ ancestors were enmeshed with the sea. Driven south from North Epirus to the Peloponnese, his forefathers took refuge on the green shores of the island of Spetses. There they laid down roots and prospered. The family surname was originally Kyriakos. The head of the family in Spetses, Anastasis Kyriakos (1758-1831), great-grandfather of Alexander Diomedes, was actively involved in the Greek struggle for independence (1821) and contributed the use of his private ship, the “Pelikanos”, renamed “Diomedes”, to the cause.

In his book entitled *Black wolves* (Mavrolykoi), Thanasis Petsalis-Diomedes, nephew of Alexander Diomedes, notes that the idea for the ship’s new name, which was also

adopted by the family, was probably the inspiration of Rigas Ferraios. In the period leading up to the War of Independence, figures and ideals drawn from classical antiquity lent moral support to the Greek cause. Diomedes was a great warrior and hero, one of the so-called Epigoni whose fathers had been among the Seven against Thebes. He also enjoyed the special protection of the goddess Athena.

Ghikas Diomedes-Kyriakos (1811-1869), the son of Anastasis Kyriakos and grandfather of Alexander Diomedes was a professor at the Law School of the University of Athens, as his father Nikolas had also been. Influenced by this environment, Alexander Diomedes studied law at Freiburg, Weimar and Berlin. The daily press of his day described how his sojourn in Germany instilled in Alexander Diomedes a romantic disposition, but we may also speculate that he saw there the celebrated botanic gardens which were at that time popular meeting places.

Many in the circles where Alexander had gained distinction wondered why a person whose career had included positions as member of parliament, minister, governor of the National Bank of Greece, founder of the Bank of Greece, prime minister, historian and academician, left his inheritance for the establishment of a botanic garden. What was the reason behind this choice?

As verdant oases and places of recreation, botanic gardens have much to contribute to society as a whole. And they also play an educational role as living museums. They protect plant life which is both rare and threatened with extinction. They sensitize the public to the importance and value of plants to humans and, more generally, heighten community awareness of the need to protect the natural environment. They provide a context for programs concerned with plant life (studies of origins, systematization, anatomy, eco-physiology, plant development) and constitute, through their plant stores and seed banks, a source of information over time for botanists. They offer jobs. And they set an aesthetic standard which touches all the senses.

It is believed that the first botanic garden with a scientific, research-and education-oriented character was founded by Aristotle in the 4th c. B.C. in the region known as Kouponia (between Ilisia and Kaisariani in modern Athens) and was enriched with rare plants sent back to his teacher by Alexander the Great from his eastward

campaign. Theophrastes was the garden's overseer and is today considered world-wide as the father of botany. At a short distance from the first botanic garden was the Lyceum of Aristotle, recently discovered next to Rigillis Street, in other words, opposite the house of Alexander Diomedes.

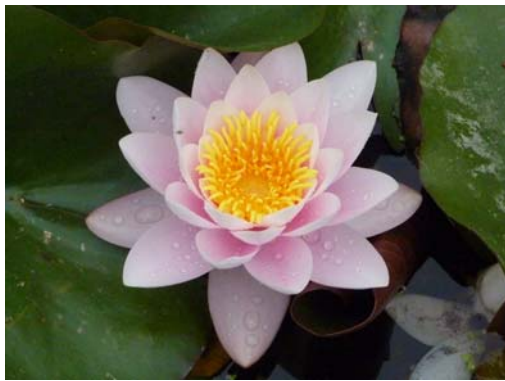
Alexander Diomedes believed that the development of the scientific branch of botany opened the way for new generations to occupy themselves with useful professions and would bring human thought and action into closer sympathy with the plant world.

It is a worthwhile diversion from your usual path to include a morning visit to the Diomedes Botanic Garden, where you will find yourself amidst a carefully tended range of plants in whose beauty you will see reborn the distinctive features of the Mediterranean landscape. You will find hearty plants closely intertwined with the cultural heritage of Greece, as well as more exotic plants from other parts of the world; plants with romantic and attractive names, such as *Senna alexandrina*, *Pyracantha coccinea*, *Olea chrysophylla*, *Laurus nobilis*, *Albizia julibrissin*. Among these also thrives one of the most ancient plants, a contemporary of the dinosaurs, namely *Ginkgo biloba* which has grown here on Earth for 200,000 years. You will walk among aromatic and pharmaceutical plants, varieties of grape vines, hemlock and balsam, water lilies, bamboo, oleander, climbing roses of many colors and many other plants. You will observe first hand the colorful beauty displayed by the parts of the plants which flourish above ground thanks to complex, life-sustaining processes which begin in the roots.

The Julia and Alexander N. Diomedes Botanic Garden has admirers, friends, an administrative council, employees, collaborators and visitors, all of whom are linked by their desire to share in nature's gifts. The Garden is open to the public every morning.

S. R.

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[photos by Doukas Doukas }