

# Efforts to Save *Himantoglossum samariense*

Report 25<sup>th</sup> October, 2014

In 2012, after many years of searching, I found one example of *Himantoglossum samariense*, the endemic Cretan lizard orchid. We stumbled across it whilst searching with guests from the UK who were looking for late flowering orchids. After finding the endemic *Epipactis cretica* and *Epipactis microphylla*, we travelled higher into the mountains to try to discover this exquisite and elusive plant. It was one of my guests, Joan Vickers, sitting in the back of the open jeep, who suddenly shouted 'Stop!' I slammed on the brakes (fortunately we were on a remote mountain dirt track with no other vehicles). And there it was – just one specimen, even though we searched the surrounding area thoroughly. As you can imagine, we took many photographs and the excitement was palpable. Sadly no lizard orchids were found at the site which was destroyed by bulldozers this year and last, despite valiant efforts by one of our members, Fotis Samaritakis, who went there from Hania regularly during the flowering period. Over the early summer Fotis went fifteen times to various locations where historically the plant has been found. Sadly, he found nothing. However, we have been given a location in central Crete, which we will check out in 2015. (Many thanks Fotis for your dedication)



This is a fabulous orchid and it is seriously endangered. Last year and this, supporters of Flowers of Crete spent many, many days searching for more examples across the island, without any success.

Very concerned for its future, I appealed to a former guest of Flowers of Crete, Tom Sampliner, who put me in touch with many orchid conservation experts from around the world. One of these, Phil Seaton, who is an acknowledged international expert on growing wild orchids from seed, has generously taken up the challenge of growing plants on from seed. Phil works in close collaboration with The Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, in London and has published several books on orchid propagation and cultivation.

So this year, after much deliberation, we went several times to the site to monitor the *Himantoglossum*'s progress. We weighed the pros and cons of erecting some form of protection and eventually decided to build a cage around it. We camouflaged this cage with dead foliage and branches, although the site is so remote we reasoned that it was very unlikely anyone would spot it

In August, the specimen had around a dozen ripe seedpods, just about to split. We carefully gathered six of these and sent them by express post to Phil in the UK. Unfortunately, we then discovered that there was very little seed, although the pods appeared to have swollen well.

Here are the very few seeds (below) that we collected. We still have no idea whether they will be viable or not.



Phil is going to do tests with another Cretan lizard orchid seeds, *Himantoglossum barlia* – Robert's Giant Orchid (common all over the island), before sowing our precious seed.

They are certainly in safe hands. Until successful tests have been completed with *H. barlia*, the *H. samariense* seeds will be safely stored at Phil's lab in Kidderminster. And next year, a group of dedicated Flowers of Crete supporters will be visiting several sites to try to find further specimens. Maybe it will be possible to hand pollinate our lone specimen.



Phil in his lab with his bargain bread box, in which he stores Petrie dishes with germinating tropical orchids. (right)

And tiny exotic orchid plantlets, doing well in a kilner jar! Let's hope that one day we can publish a photo of our *Himantoglossums* at the same stage. (below)

It has been suggested that we obtain permission and try to raise funding to build a permanent cage around the one *Himantoglossum* plant we have found. In theory this is a great idea, but as it is on publicly grazed common land in a very remote location, finding out how to do this will prove a problem. We also need to raise the funds to achieve this, should we receive permission. Any help with either issue would be greatly appreciated. Please contact me [julia@flowersofcrete.info](mailto:julia@flowersofcrete.info) if you think you can help us save this rare and beautiful species.



*Earlier this year I spoke at the 7<sup>th</sup> PlantaEuropa Conference which was held at The Orthodox Academy of Crete in*

*Kolymbari. My subject was the rare and endangered orchids of Crete and what we can do to preserve them. In 2015 I have been invited to speak in Hungary and in Algeria on the way forward for the orchids of Europe. Julia Jones, FLS*