

# Talkabout

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## Call of the **WILDFLOWER**

Forget forbidding castles, vampires and dark and stormy nights. When the sun shines on the meadows of Transylvania, the landscape becomes a canvas for millions of rare and colourful wildflowers, perfect for the portfolio of Australian botanical artist Beverly Allen. **WORDS ASHLEY HAY**

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES

Sunset in the mountains of Transylvania, Romania

*Nelumbo lutea*  
(yellow American lotus) by Beverly Allen



*Epiphyllum oxypetalum*  
(orchid cactus) by Beverly Allen will feature in *Botanica: The Art Of Seduction*



Red-banded fritillary on *Melitaea didyma* (ragged robin) painted by Beverly Allen

“I TEND TO GO FOR UNUSUAL THINGS. THESE TINY FLOWERS WERE SO FAR OUT OF MY COMFORT ZONE; THEY WERE A CHALLENGE”

of Transylvania’s richly diverse landscape. And there is a singular and unexpected intersection between England and the villages of Zalanpatak and Viscri these artists were visiting. Properties have been purchased and restored in each village by Count Tibor Kalnoky for Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales, and are now operating as ecotourism retreats ([www.transylvaniancastle.com](http://www.transylvaniancastle.com)).

As patron of the Mihai Eminescu Trust, which works to save and restore villages in Romania, part of Prince Charles’ aim was “not to set these villages in aspic,” says Allen, but to find a sustainable way of preserving them. “They’re Saxon villages, which were settled 500-600 years ago when the Saxons were invited to farm this area.”

Those villages, and their way of life, remained relatively intact until the early 1990s, when almost 90 per cent of the Saxon descendants accepted an offer of repatriation to Germany.

Prince Charles makes a private visit once a year and perhaps the idea for this florilegium came from

a walk he took in these meadows. It is being created under the aegis of the Prince’s School of Traditional Arts as a permanent record of Transylvania’s flora, and follows an earlier two volumes on Highgrove, the prince’s Gloucestershire estate, to which Allen contributed *Cyathea australis* (rough tree fern).

After flying from London to Targu Mures, the artists arrived in Zalanpatak. “It was beautiful,” says Allen. “The hills are wooded up high with stands of hornbeam, oak and some beech, and below that are pastures and meadows, and then the villages. We spent the first couple of days walking the meadows, scouting for things that were in bloom. Then we settled down and worked from nine in the morning until six or seven at night.”

The Australian artist selected three plants to illustrate for possible inclusion in the florilegium: *Dictamnus albus* (burning bush); *Dactylorhiza sambucina* (elder-flowered orchid); and *Chamaespartium sagittale* (whose delicate yellow blooms belie its common name, winged greenweed). ▶

ILLUSTRATIONS: COURTESY BEVERLY ALLEN



**TALK OF TRAVELLING** to Transylvania conjures up images of vampires and werewolves; a quest, perhaps, involving wooden stakes and silver bullets. But the past northern spring saw a different sort of expedition head to this historical region of central Romania, when eight botanical artists, including Australia’s Beverly Allen, who is internationally renowned in this field, spent two weeks in its wildflower-bedecked meadows. “Everyone made jokes about Dracula,” Allen says. “But the invitation was irresistible.”

Allen was contributing to a *florilegium* (anthology) of the meadow flowers of Transylvania: the region boasts more than 2000 species of wildflowers, which makes it “idyllic from a floral point of view,” she says. “The flowers are there from May through to July, and to

walk through them is extraordinary – you’re trying to keep to the tracks, but there are just so many flowers. You’re treading on crocuses because there’s no way around them.”

Many of these blooms were once plentiful across Europe and the British Isles, but they’ve mostly disappeared. “England, particularly, has lost so many meadow and roadside plants because they cut them at the wrong time,” Allen explains. “In Transylvania, they’re still hand-scything the meadows and they do it at the right time so the flower seeds fall and are not overgrazed.”

In recognition of this unique and important biodiversity, the Romanian government and various conservation groups such as Fundatia ADEPT ([fundatia-adept.org](http://fundatia-adept.org)) are working to preserve tracts



+ Works by Beverly Allen and other Australian botanical artists will be on show at *Botanica: The Art of Seduction*, Lion Gate Lodge, Royal Botanic Garden, Sydney, May 24-June 15. [rbgsyd.nsw.gov.au](http://rbgsyd.nsw.gov.au)

**Clockwise from left: *Carlina acaulis* (stemless thistle) painted by Beverly Allen; purple crocus; rare swallowtail butterfly**



only how beautiful the flowers were, but some of their characteristics. Allen spent about 100 hours on her orchid painting alone.

"It has two colour forms simultaneously, and another variation, and it roots from the leaf, which I wanted to show as well. Tiny little thing; it was a shocker."

While the artists worked with their floral fragments, village life went on outside their windows with a passing procession of cycling tourists, schoolchildren, turkeys, geese, goats and cows.

"At 6.15am you'd hear the cowbells as they headed out after milking, walking with the goats and the odd horse down the village road and turning up to the hills. The cowherd was behind them, but they knew where they were going. At the end of the day, they'd walk back and peel off at their correct gates."

Allen was captivated by the villages with their brightly painted houses with residents' names inscribed on their gables and clumps of succulents to ward off the spirits.

"Pretty is the word," she says. "There are dog roses all over the roadsides, meadows full of flowers, and you hear real cuckoos." Going through her photographs at night, she would count up to a dozen different insects on a single plant, "and butterflies, so many butterflies".

In early 2014, Allen heard that all three of her works had been chosen for the florilegium. The project, which began in 2012, is expected to take five years to complete, with about 40 artists each painting three plants.

With her finished works safely stored in London, Allen says she'd be happy to visit Transylvania as a tourist. "It would be lovely to go back and travel a bit more," she says, before adding with a smile, "We didn't go to Dracula's castle. They did offer, but..."

"I tend to go for unusual things," she says, "things that are bold or strange. These tiny pale yellow flowers - well, they were so far out of my comfort zone; they were a challenge." With roughly three days to devote to each plant, "we were recording as much as we could - sketching, photographing, getting the colours down and the drawing in. Obviously, you can't bring specimens back to Australia."

There was some sightseeing and gastronomic respite - trips to a fortified church and a former hunting lodge under restoration; lunches on different properties; local food and wine (made from vines growing where they sat). The local "teabags" were "a little piece of plastic wrap with three sprigs of herbs wrapped up. I've no idea what they were," says Allen, "but I drank it every day."

**THE BEST BOTANICAL** painting goes beyond a plant's appearance, and for this project, the artists wanted to capture not

+ Ashley Hay is the author of *Herbarium* and *Museum* (with photographer Robyn Stacey). Her most recent book is the novel *The Railwayman's Wife* (Allen & Unwin)