Flower Fairies™ by Cicely Mary Barker, a significant experience in education for plant diversity

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Abstract

In May 2008 the Botanic Garden of the University of Salento organized an educational event based on the theme of the Flower Fairies™ by Cicely Mary Barker, as part of the activities of the Project “CERATONIA” (Programme Interreg IIIA Italy - Albania, Axis II, Measure 2.1, Action 3). It had the aim of raising awareness of the interested parties in the conservation status and prospects of exploitation of plant species from Italy, Albania and other Mediterranean countries. This initiative was targeted mainly at primary school children, in order to increase their knowledge and respect of plant diversity in the Mediterranean area; in addition strengthening the conservation of plant species typical to the area. This was achieved by using an artistic approach, which had a great impact on both children and adults, at the same time maintaining its scientific credibility. The event consisted of an exhibition of graphic panels, located at the Fine Arts Academy of Lecce, with the pictorial representations of about sixty fairies and related sonnets representing a set of Mediterranean plant species. Each panel had a framework with botanical information. Participants also took part in a theatrical adaptation of Barker’s most well known work which took place in a nearby wildlife park.

Keywords

Awareness, biodiversity, domination, education, fairies, innovation, magic, struggle

The initiative for the activity described in this case study was foreseen in the CERATONIA project (Interreg II cccc), which included in its aims training and awareness programmes in both schools and the local community. This initiative had to overcome both cultural and bureaucratic obstacles in a land which is no stranger both to struggle and domination, literally and metaphorically.

In order to clarify these claims it is necessary to have some background information about the area, geographically, historically and culturally. Salento lies in the deep, south east of Italy. It is quite literally on the heel of the boot which defines Italy. Deriving from the Italian word “sale” meaning salt and “vento” meaning wind, two things that any native of the area are experts in. The name and the direction of the wind can influence the day’s activities, whether you spend the day on the Adriatic coast or on the Ionian one. Salento is geographically unique, a peninsula which lies between two seas, an area which for many years was known as the “Terra d’Otranto”. Although part of the region of Apulia it is very different linguistically and is very rich in both folklore and traditions (De Martino, 2002), an excellent reason for linking fairies to the botanic aspect of this initiative.

For centuries Salento has been a place where there has been a constant struggle to dominate the land and its natural habitat. It was an area which was entirely covered by forests (native oaks for example, Quercus ilex L., Quercus coccifera L., Quercus pubescens Willd. subsp. pubescens) and so in the 15th century a programme of deforestation by the farmers began. The land also had to be cleared of rocks in order to make it usable and this need to keep the land in check continues even today. Fields are neatly and almost obsessively divided and surrounded by dry stone walls. Each field is maniacally cultivated with almost military precision. Today’s farmer keeps his land in check by the use of fire, during the long hot summer months it is not unusual to see fires in order to prevent the “natural vegetation” (in this case we are in danger of losing rare species found only in scrubland) taking over the cultivated areas, it is in fact another way of dominating the land (Marchiori et al., 1998). In addition to struggling with the natural vegetation the farmer also has to struggle with natural elements, Salento has long very hot summers, and while it is fertile it can be
the victim of freak weather conditions, summer storms and sometimes tornadoes. The winters are often wet and damp and as there are no rivers or lakes fields can easily become waterlogged.

Until the late 18th century Salento was continuously invaded due to it being the last outpost between the West and the East. It was therefore the stepping stone for the following: the Greeks, the Turks, the French the Spanish etc. In fact remnants of these many invasions can be seen along the coast line, lookouts/fortified towers and almost scattered everywhere around the countryside fortified houses/castles known as masserie. The whole of the countryside is marked by human settlements and dwellings, so despite its isolation from the rest of Italy it is surprisingly densely populated.

Despite the continuous invasions everyone left their mark on the area especially from the botanic point of view. From the East came the principal growing techniques and the know-how on organizing gardens. From the Phoenician merchants came the foundation of commercial enterprise with the buying and selling of fruit trees. From the Far East came the most important species of trees cultivated in the Mediterranean area: the fig tree, the pear tree, the apricot tree, the plum, and the walnut tree. All of these were brought by merchants coming and going from East to West, bringing with them species such as black mulberry, but most importantly the citrus trees, that in later years became the predominant inhabitants of our gardens.

From the economic point of view another very important import was that of the vine, probably brought by the Greeks who colonised the area in the VIII-VII centuries BC. Salento has an emerging wine industry which in the last ten years has produced some excellent and prestigious wines.

As mentioned earlier, the original landscape was covered by huge areas of evergreen oaks, Mediterranean xeric grasslands and marshes. Salento again is quite unique in the fact that there is no surface water, no rivers or real lakes; there are only small areas of coastal lagoons. This is another problem, especially when it rains, as there are no rivers or streams to absorb the excess water and so there is a large amount of underground water.

In addition, Salento is a highly interesting area from the bio-geographical point of view. Its geological history and geographical position mark it as a meeting point between the flora of the Eastern Mediterranean Basin and that of the rest of Italy. This explains the presence of Eastern Mediterranean species such as *Ephedra foemina* Forssk., *Erica manipuliflora* L., *Quercus ithaburiensis* Decne. subsp. *macrolepis* (Kotschy) Hedge & Yalt. and *Aegialophila pumilio* (L.) Boiss. The flora of the Salento is made up of 1,033 specific taxa and 307 sub specific taxa organised into 21 ferns and allied groups, 6 gymnosperms, 992 dicots and 321 monocots, for a total of 115 families and 560 genera. The considerable incidence of therophytes highlights a clear Mediterranean imprint of the investigated area. The endemic species of the Salento represent 3.21% of the total flora: there are 7 endemic species exclusive to Salento and 4 endemic of Apulia, while the others are endemic of Southern Italy and the Balkan Peninsula (Mele et al., 2006).

Over the centuries Mediterranean Man has struggled to tame the wild and savage beauty of the countryside. In taming his environment he eliminated all of Nature's creativity by enclosing it in a walled garden and filling it with fruit trees which were necessary to help him in his survival. This concept is true even today: most gardens are created not for their natural beauty, but to keep the countryside tidy and useful. Perhaps one of the first things a stranger to the area notices is that it is completely lacking in public gardens and open spaces, children have no green areas in which to play. This was another important reason to promote this kind of project, that today's generation are completely ignorant of the great wealth of natural beauty that surrounds them.

It was fortunate for us that one of the main aims of project CERATONIA was the promotion of biodiversity conservation and awareness in the local area. But as always the main thread of this
case study was the struggle to overcome opposition to anything new and innovative. The school system is very traditional, children sit in rows, and the teacher is situated at the front of the class. Group work and a sense of group identity is viewed with fear and scepticism. It is not unusual to stay seated at the same desk for six hours at a time, playtime is usually spent in the classroom and any open areas are ignored and left overgrown. There are no Parent Teacher associations who work together for the promotion of extracurricular activities, in fact “Voluntary” and “Volunteer” are unknown concepts in our society. Everything extra is usually paid for, so a project like ours was initially viewed with suspicion. So from the beginning we really had our work cut out. In addition to this we also had to convince a system which views innovation as a form of anarchy, in fact there was always the risk that our project would become lost in our complicated bureaucratic system. It was therefore very important that we did not lose sight of our aims.

The question now to be asked is why we chose Cicely Mary Barker. The main reason was that most children today are more disconnected from nature than previous generations (Louv, 2005). Also society is developing in such a way that children are having no contact with nature or their own natural environment, preferring to interact with virtual dimensions. The results being, that not only do fewer and fewer children know about wild flora, but they also don’t know or recognise the most common species of cultivated flora. Our children are victims of “over structured” time, their every waking moment is filled and their lives are stressful, parents are over protective and have a sense of “stranger danger”. However, all children are fascinated by fairies and a sense of magic in general. Cicely Mary Barker has fascinated generations of children and her magic never fails to attract them. Different to today’s generation of fairies which are virtually generated and isolated from the sense of nature, Cicely Mary Barker’s fairies were painstakingly drawn and painted by hand, connecting them to both wild and cultivated flowers. So along with Barker’s message “the need to believe”, we had found a combination which would meet our aims and would be a sure success.

Armed with the necessary permission from Barker’s publishing house our project began to take shape, panels were created using, where possible Barker’s original illustrations (Barker, 2010), and in other cases they were adapted to fit our needs. A local theatre group was contacted and venues were chosen. It was decided to house the panels in the local “Accademia delle Belle Arti” (our Fine Arts Academy), a fitting place with its beautiful Baroque cloister to hold such an exhibition. Local schools were contacted and visitors included children and adults alike. The event coincided with another local event, “Cortili aperti”, when private residents living in the historical centre open their gardens to the public. Although a highly successful event, it is another example of the lack of access to gardens and the strong sense of the private owner. Throughout the week two local botanists explained to the children the importance of plant diversity.

Our theatre group worked their magic in the natural park known as “Rauccio”, allowing our young participants to really be in touch with nature (Barker, 2006). The idea for this aspect of the project came from the necessity to create a more hands on activity and to bring our children closer to the immense natural wealth found in the area. The costs of the entire project can be found in table 1. The project was repeated again in 2009 when we were invited to take part in a local book festival, this time we used only the exhibition panels but it proved to be equally popular and successful.

**Conclusion**

All in all, our project was a success. However, there are things that could be changed. One would be to take our work into the schools and try to make it more hands on, involving the children in actually growing plants and protecting the areas around them. Contact has also been made with the organizers of an International Ecological Film Festival, who have as part of their competition a schools section.
Thanks to The Estate of Cicely Mary Barker 2008, Fabbri Editori (Gruppo RCS) Milano and Lesley Jane Ray

References


Fig. 1 – Typical woody vegetation of Salento (Quercus ilex L.)

Fig. 2 – Typical dry stone shelter (pajara)
Fig. 3 – Rural landscape (*Olea europaea* L. var. *sativa*)

Fig. 4 – Enclosed “orchard-garden”
Flower Fairies™ by Cicely Mary Barker, a significant experience in education for plant diversity  Ippolito et al.

Fig. 5 – Flower Fairies™ botanical panels
Fig. 7 – Flower Fairies™ Book Festival exhibition

Table 1 – Costs of the project

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<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Costs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Panels including all graphics, printing and production</td>
<td>€ 3,550.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educational support, games and entertainment</td>
<td>€ 750.00</td>
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<td>Theatre group</td>
<td>€ 2,750.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Additional costs, audio, lighting</td>
<td>€ 2,950.00</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>€ 10,000.00</strong></td>
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