

FLORA AND FAUNA OF THE MALTESE ISLANDS

MALTESE ROCK CENTAURY

The Maltese Rock Centaury (Maltese: *Widnet il-Baħar*) is Malta's national plant. In 1971, this endemic plant along with the Blue Rock Thrush (*il-Merill*) were chosen as our national plant and bird respectively.

Scientific Name: In 1830, the Maltese botanist Stefano Zerafa, described a new species of plant from Wied Babu (*Żurrieq*), and assigned to it the scientific name *Centaurea crassifolia*. Some years later, the name was changed to *Centaurea spatulata*, and eventually this plant became known as *Palaeocyanus crassifolius*. Further studies revealed that this was a new Genus. Today, this plant is scientifically known as *Cheirolophus crassifolius*. The generic name *Cheirolophus* means hand-crest, referring to the hand-shaped bract tips of the flower-head, while *crassifolius* means thick or fleshy leaves.

Description: A member of the family Asteraceae. An evergreen plant with perennial flowers. The thistle-like head is purple in colour, standing on a thin long stalk. The leaves are long, spatula-shaped, and fleshy.

Distribution: The Maltese Rock Centaury is an endemic species, thereby occurring only in the Maltese Islands, and nowhere else. In the Maltese Islands, it also has a limited distribution, growing along the southern sea cliffs all the way up to Gozo, but missing from Comino. In recent years, it has been planted in center strips and roundabouts, as well as in public and private gardens.

Status: Common.

Habitat: The species is confined to rocky coastal cliffs and valley slopes along the south and south-western cliffs of Malta and Gozo.

Flowering Season: May to July is the flowering season, although in some years, flowering plants may be encountered as late as September.

Conservation: The Maltese Centaury is threatened by habitat loss and illegal cutting. It is a legally protected species.

