
REDISCOVERY OF *ASPARAGUS STIPULARIS* FORSKÅL (FAMILY: ASPARAGACEAE) IN THE MALTESE ISLANDS (CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN)

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ABSTRACT

The presence of *A. stipularis* on the island of Gozo (Maltese islands) is reported and information on distribution and habitat is given. Old unconfirmed records from the island of Malta are discussed.

Asparagus stipularis Forskål (*A. horridus* L. f.) is native to the Canary islands and the Mediterranean from Portugal and Morocco (Schönfelder & Schönfelder 1994) to Lebanon and Palestine (George 1932). It is present in Sicily (Tornabene 1887) and Lampedusa while similar plants from Linosa with long and thick cladodes are considered unusual specimens of *A. aphyllus* L. (Sommier 1908).

Sommier & Caruana Gatto (1915) do not record *A. stipularis* from Malta but describe two unusual varieties of *A. aphyllus* L. (var. *abbreviatus* and var. *elongatus*) both of which do not resemble *A. stipularis*. In the Maltese islands *A. stipularis* is recorded under the name *Asparagus aphyllus* var. *stipularis* Forsk. from the island of Malta (Wied Incita, Buskett and Wardija) by Borg (1927) who also provides a correct description of the species. However, his records were never confirmed by other botanists and a search of Borg's herbarium at Argotti Botanic Gardens by the curator Mr Joseph Buhagiar revealed no material to substantiate Borg's records (Joseph Buhagiar personal communication). *A. stipularis* is not included in Haslam *et al.* (1977) or Lanfranco (1989).

During a survey of the south-western coastal cliffs of Gozo between Xlendi and Wied Sansun in June 2006 a group of *Asparagus stipularis* was encountered growing on a small terrace beneath the clifftops. In October of the same year a much larger population was found fringing the clifftops between Ta'Cenc and Xlendi for several kilometres and in March 2007 the species was encountered in some locations along the cliffs between Wardija point and Xlendi. In all cases the plants grew mainly on small terraces in the cliffs. Only where such terraces with *A. stipularis* were present near the clifftops the population extended few metres into the degraded garrigue and abandoned fields nearby. The sole exception was one single plant at Ta'Cenc which was encountered on a patch of degraded garrigue approximately 300 m inland.

The only other native *Asparagus* species in the Maltese islands is *A. aphyllus*, a common species which is present in large numbers in all Gozitan *A. stipularis* locations. While both species are extremely variable in growth habit, branching, shape and length of the cladodes and colour they can be easily distinguished by the number of cladodes. *A. aphyllus* has several (usually three to seven) cladodes of different length per fascicle while the number of cladodes in *A. stipularis* is usually one to three per fascicle (Tutin 1980). Another distinguishing feature is the usually much more glaucous colour in *A. stipularis* (Fig. 1).

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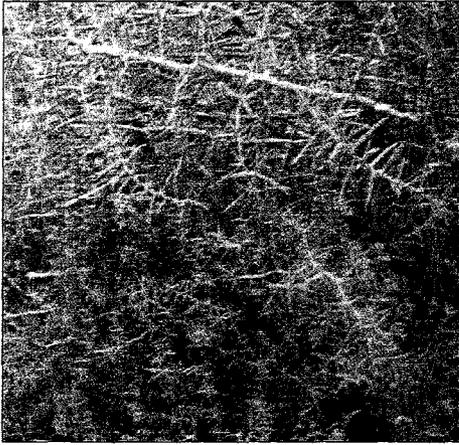


Fig 1: *A. stipularis* (above) and *A. aphyllus*, Ta'Cenc

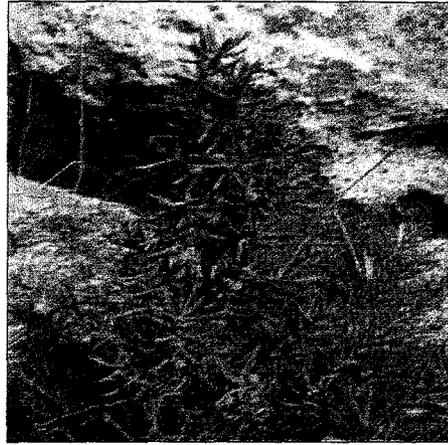


Fig. 2: *A. stipularis*, Xlendi



Fig. 3: *A. stipularis* flower, Ta'Cenc

Although the flowering time of both species overlaps no hybrids or intermediates could be found in any of the populations. In contrast, the situation in Linosa and Lampedusa seems to be more complicated (Sommier 1908). It is possible that *A. stipularis* has a wider distribution along maritime cliffs in Gozo and maybe in other islands of the Maltese archipelago but the records of Borg (1927) from inland sites in Malta remain doubtful. It is still unclear why the species seems to be largely restricted to maritime cliffs in Gozo, especially since it can be found in inland and even mountain areas on the European continent (own observation).

Voucher specimens of *A. stipularis* from Ta'Cenc were deposited in the private herbaria of Mr Edwin Lanfranco (University of Malta) and of the author while live material from Wardija point was planted in the Argotti botanic garden of Malta.

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