

In the realm of the greenbelt

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This year again, in mid-May, in the village of Varvara, the numerous admirers of Strandzha gathered for the region's traditional Green Heather Festival.

At the 19th edition of the Festival, alongside the usual programme, which includes farmers' markets, lectures, culinary delights, folklore groups from Strandzha, and demonstrations of local customs and traditions, the organisers from Nature Park "Strandzha" at the Executive Forest Agency once again included hiking routes of varying difficulty for motivated tourists and nature lovers.

The routes ranged from easy, entirely coastal ones with remarkable rock geological formations, suitable for beginner admirers of Strandzha's nature, to routes over 15 km long with an elevation gain of around 400 m.

The two longest and most difficult routes were dedicated to the symbol of Strandzha – the Green Heather.

The first one, to “Babite”, Arabelyat and the green heather, exceptionally picturesque, continued after the “Fishermen’s Village” westwards towards the centuries-old ash trees “Babite”. From there it ascended to its highest point – Mount “Arabelyat”, known for its curious groves of wild relatives of the olive – the mock privets.



*The mock privet (Phillyrea latifolia) is an evergreen shrub or small tree of the Olive family (Oleaceae). It reaches a height of 1 to 5–6 metres. The leaves are small, hard and leathery. Their colour is dark to olive green. The wood is hard and strong. The mock privet grows in areas where the climate is transitional Mediterranean, the winter is mild and the temperatures are not too low. The habitats formed by the mock privet are of exceptional importance for the existence of Mediterranean plants and animals in Bulgaria. Among the evergreen shrublands, the conservation-significant fungus species *Urnula craterium* is often found.*

From the peak, the route gently descended towards Papiysko Dere and thus reached the stream valley at the foot of the locality Gyolat, where the kingdom of the Strandzha green heather lies. Finally, the route headed east, reaching the most sacred place for the residents of the village of Varvara – the holy spring and the small monastery “Holy Virgin Mary”.

The longest route, the interpretative panoramic circular trail “At the Foot of the Extinct Volcano above Varvara”, was intended only for advanced hikers. Most of the route follows cart tracks, but there are several steep sections where it passes along forest paths. The trail initially passed through a wooded hilly area near the chapel “Holy Virgin Mary”, then along the stone formations of volcanic character.

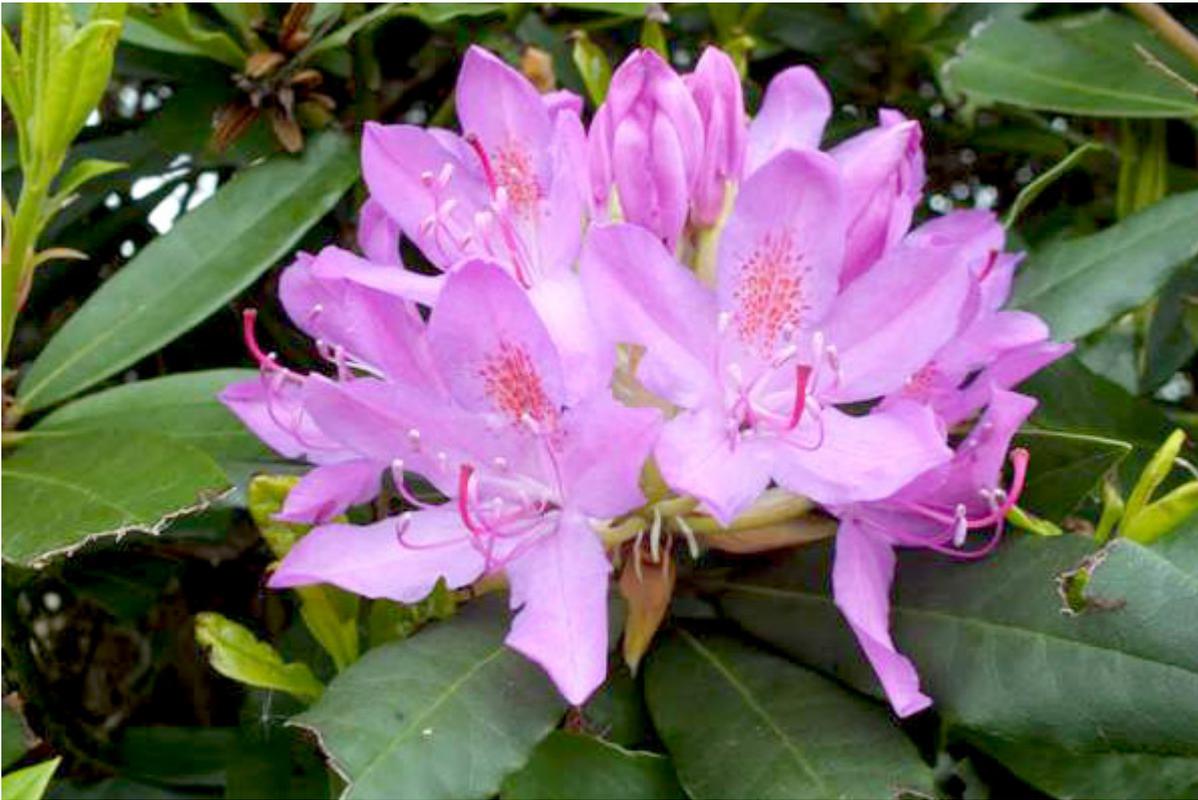


The Strandzha green heather (*Rhododendron ponticum*) is an evergreen shrub reaching a height of up to 2–3 m.

Rhododendron literally means “rose tree”, and the name is composed of the Greek words “rodon” (ῥόδον) – rose, and “dendron” (δένδρον) – tree.

The leaves are glossy green, large, elongate-lanceolate and glabrous. The stem has a smooth grey bark. The flowers are large, lilac-pink, grouped at the tips of the branches in umbel-shaped inflorescences. The plant is distributed on steep slopes and deep ravines as a second understorey layer in forests of Oriental beech and Oriental durmast oak in Strandzha. Its distribution range is highly restricted and is closely linked to specific soil and climatic conditions.

It has a prolonged flowering period from mid-April to mid-June, depending on the spring temperatures.



The Green Heather – the symbol of the Strandzha Mountain – was widespread during the warm and humid Tertiary climate as far north as the Scandinavian Peninsula, in present-day Sweden, whereas at present, within the borders of the continent, the green heather is found only in Strandzha.

The Festival is implemented with the financial support of the Executive Forest Agency, Tsarevo Municipality and the South-East State Enterprise – Sliven.