

## **Plant landscape and phytodiversity in the ancient town of Erice (NW Sicily)**

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The town of Erice, in the province of Trapani, is an environmental unicum in the context of the ancient settlements of western Sicily. Its history, substrates, and particular climate, generated by its geo-orographic position, make it a particular hot spot of natural and cultural biodiversity. Located on the top of Mount San Giuliano, in addition to natural habitats with their specific florulas, the town shows small gardens and among the few inhabitants there is a widespread green culture. A tourist destination by its various architectural and landscape historical peculiarities, Erice presents a residential center made up by small stone buildings, with small courtyards or “bagli” often used to house pergolas, decorative or fruit plants placed in pots or in the ground. Protected from the wind - thanks to the special microclimatic conditions that occur at the top of the relief exposed to moist sea breeze- they find the optimal environment to grow and preserve.

The Giardino del Balio, Villa Pepoli and the remains of the park around the town, as well as the Castello di Venere and the various rocky relieves within the town, the old walls of protection of the city, are ideal habitats for many native and cultivated species. Among the former we remember the endemic and very rare *Centaurea erycina*, *Silene nefelites*, and *Brassica villosa* subsp. *drepanensis*. Other endemic species find the best habitat in emerging cliffs and in architectural artefacts; they are *Silene fruticosa*, *Dianthus rupicola* subsp. *rupicola*, *Seseli bocconeii*, etc. In the same contexts other chasmophytes are also frequent among which *Athamantha sicula* emerges. On the margin of Villa Pepoli, awesome trees of *Prunus mahaleb* subsp. *mahaleb* testify to the ancient settlement of native tree species - rare on the island - then locally cultivated. In the Giardino del Balio, in addition to the ancient borders of *Buxus sempervirens*, luxuriant specimens of *B. balearica* remarks the sub-oceanic character of the climate at the top of Mt. San Giuliano. The presence of a rich contingent of pteridophytes and bryophytes also depends on such climate, including the rare epiphytic moss *Cryphaea heteromalla*, common right on the branches of the two *Buxus* species.