CONSEJO SUPERIOR DE INVESTIGACIONES CIENTÍFICAS
Taxonomical notes on the Sicilian populations of
*Asperula gussonei* (Rubiaceae):
*A. peloritana* sp. nov.

by
Cristian Brullo, Salvatore Brullo, Gian Pietro Giusso del Galdo & Leonardo Scuderi

Dipartimento di Botanica, via A. Longo 19, I-95125 Catania, Italy. brullo@dipbot.unict.it

Abstract

Taxonomical investigation on *Asperula gussonei*, a rare Sicilian endemism, allowed us to verify that the Madonie population is well differentiated from the Mt. Scuderi one. These two populations are here treated as distinct species: *A. gussonei* Boiss. from Madonie and *A. peloritana* sp. nov. from Mt. Scuderi. The main morphological and ecological differences between the two species are pointed out. Their iconographies and relationships with the allied species are given too.

Keywords: Rubiaceae, endemism, *Asperula*, Sicily, taxonomy.

Introduction
The aim of this work is the taxonomical survey of *Asperula gussonei* Boiss., a species circumscribed to some mountain stands of Sicily. It was firstly identified by Gussone (1827) as *A. nitida*, species described by Sibthorp & Smith (1806) on Greek material. Afterward, Gussone (1843) attributed these populations to *A. suberosa* Sibth. & Sm., highlighting that the Sicilian plant is very different from *A. nitida*. Later, Boissier (1849) considered the specimens referred by Gussone to *A. suberosa* as a distinct species, named *A. gussonei*. As concern the distribution in Sicily of this species, it was collected for the first time by Gussone (1827, 1843) on some mountains of the Madonie massif (Scalone, Quacella, Mufara) and on the Peloritani Range (Mount Scuderi), where it occurs so far. According to literature, herbarium investigations and field surveys, this species grows exclusively on the Madonie and Mt. Scuderi, where it is represented by small and few-numbered populations. An in-depth macro- and micro-morphological analysis on living material coming from these localities allowed to verify that the Mt. Scuderi population is very different from that one occurring in the Madonie. The main differences regard the vegetative and reproductive structures such as the leaves, inflorescences, flowers and fruits. As a consequence of this, it was necessary to deal with the lectotypification of *A. gussonei*. In particular, basing on the protologue of Gussone (1843) and Boissier (1849), the morphological features listed are the same of those observed in the specimens coming from the Madonie. Therefore, we choose as lectotype
one of the syntypes preserved in the Gussone Herbarium (NAP-GUSS), in particular the specimen collected by himself at Mt. Scalone (Madonie), while the population of Mt. Scuderi is here described as a species new to science, named *Asperula peloritana*.

**Material and methods**

The morphological study was carried out on living plants coming from Madonie and Mt. Scuderi, as well as on herbarium material (CAT, FI, G and NAP). The micro-morphology of the mericarp outer coat was studied on dried material with the aid of a scanning electron microscope (SEM) Leica Cambridge LEO 420. The preparation of the seeds for SEM observation was done according to the protocol of Huttunen & Laine (1983).

**Results and discussion**

Within the populations previously referred to *Asperula gussonei* by Strobl (1878), Nicotra (1878), Cesati & al. (1884), Arcangeli (1882, 1894), Tanfani (1887), Lojacono-Pojero (1902), Beguinot (1903), Fiori (1927), Ehrendorfer & Krendl (1976), Ehrendorfer (1982), and Giardina & al. (2007), it is possible to distinguish two morphologically well differentiated taxa which have to be treated as distinct species. They are: *A. gussonei* Boiss. s.str., circumscribed to the Madonie massif, and *A. peloritana* sp. nov., exclusive of Mt. Scuderi (Peloritani).

*A. gussonei* Boiss., Diagn. Pl. Or. Nov. 2(10): 63. 1849 (Figs. 1, 3A)

*A. nitida* Guss., Fl. Sicul. Prod. 1: 168. 1827, non Sibth. & Sm. 1806

*A. suberosa* Guss., Fl. Sic. Syn. 1: 180. 1843, non Sibth. & Sm. 1806


*A. cynanchica* var. *gussonei* (Boiss.) Fiori, Nuov. Fl. Italia 2. 503. 1927

Plant caespitose, densely pulvinate, glabrous, glaucous pruinose. Stems 3-9 cm long, very branched, with internodes 1-4 mm long, shorter than leaves. Leaves 3-8 mm long, 1-1.8 mm wide, narrowly elliptical, often weakly incurved, acute to apiculate at the apex, with midrib robust, 0.4-0.6 mm wide, and margin flat, thickened, 0.15-0.25 mm wide, minutely serrulate-hispid. Inflorescence thyrsoid, compact, few-flowered, arranged in terminal cluster of 6-15 flowers. Leaf-like bracts 2-3 mm long, 0.5-0.7 mm wide. Pedicel 0.8-1.8 mm long. Corolla 6-8 mm long, hypocrateriform to narrowly infundibuliform, pink to dark pink, glabrous, smooth; tube 4.5-5 mm long; lobes 1.8-2.5 mm long, ovate-oblancolete, thickened at the margin and appendiculate at the apex. Stamen filaments almost completely decurrent along the tube; anthers purplish, 1.5-1.7 mm long not reaching the throat. Ovary globose-ellipsoid 1.2-1.4 mm long, slightly striate-sulcate, with a short coronule at the tip. Style bifid, 1.2-1.5 mm long, with 2 stigmas globose-papilllose. Mericarp 1.5-2.5 mm long, glabrous, minutely striate-sulcate.

Lectotype: Madonie, all’ovest del Monte Scalone, 30-VI, *Gussone s.n.* (NAP-GUSS), here designated.

**Etymology.** The species is named after G. Gussone (1877-1866), Neapolitan botanist who collected and described this species.

**Distribution.** On the basis of literature data and herbarium investigations, *Asperula gussonei* is localized on some mountain stands of the Madonie (Mt. Mufara, Mt. Scalone, Mt. Quacella, and Mt. Pomieri) where it is represented by few-numbered, scattered populations at an altitude of 1400-2000 m (Fig. 4).

**Habitat.** *Asperula gussonei* is a chasmophilous orophyte growing on Mesozoic limestones and dolomites (Fig. 5). It is a member of a rupetrian plant-community represented by *Asperuletum gussonei* Brullo 1984, association of the *Saxifragion australis* Pedrotti ex Brullo 1984, alliance belonging to the class *Asplenietea trichomanis* (Br.-Bl. in Mayer & Br.-Bl. 1934) Oberd. 1977. This coenosis is particularly rich in rare endemics, such as *Helichrysum nebrodense* Heldr., *Draba olympoides* Strobl, *Hieracium symphytifolium* Froel., *Aubrieta deltoidea* subsp. *siculo* (Strobl) Phitos, *Edraianthus siculus* Strobl, *Saxifraga australis* Moric., *Silene saxifraga* subsp. *lojaconoi* (Lacaita) Mazzola & Raimondo, *Potentilla nebrodensis* Strobl ex Zimmer, *Minuartia graminifolia* subsp. *rosani* (Ten.) Mattf., and *Arenaeria grandiflora* L. (Brullo, 1984; Brullo & al., 2004).

**Phenology.** Flowering July to August.

**Conservation status.** According to Conti & al. (1997), *Asperula gussonei* is considered a plant at low risk of extinction (LR), probably because it grows on rupetrian stands which are habitats usually less affected by human activities. Due to its rarity and few number of individuals, it should be better to consider this species as vulnerable (VU).

**Taxonomic remarks.** For some morphological features chiefly regarding the leaf size, corolla glabrous, and mericarp minutely striate-sulcate, *Asperula gussonei* seems to be taxonomically quite isolated. Nevertheless, due to its compact pulvinate habit, robust leaf midrib, *Asperula gussonei* shows a certain similarity with *Asperula pumila* Moric. from Sardinia, rather than with *Asperula peloritana*.

*Asperula peloritana* Brullo C., Brullo, Giusso & Scuderi, sp. nov. (Figs. 2, 3B)
Fig. 1. Asperula gussonei: a, habit; b, leaves; c, leaf-like bracts; d, leaf apex; e, inflorescence; f, flower bud; g, flower; h, open corolla; i, basal part of the corolla tube (outer face); j, anther; k, pistils; l, fruit; m, mericarp (tangential face) [C. da Pomieri, Brullo C., Brullo S., Scuderi s.n. (CAT)].
Fig. 2. *Asperula peloritana*: a, habit; b, leaves; c, leaf-like bracts; d, leaf apex; e, inflorescence; f, flower bud; g, flower; h, open corolla; i, basal part of the corolla tube (outer face); j, anther; k, pistils; l, fruit; m, mericarp (tangential face) [form type material].
A *Asperula gussonei* habitus laxe pulvinato, prostrato, caulibus 5-12 cm longis, paucis ramosis, internodiis 4-10 mm longis, inferioribus folio longioribus, superiores folio brevioribus, foliis inferioribus 3-6 × 1-1,5 mm, foliis superioribus late linearibus 8-18 × 1,1-1,4 mm, costa foliorum subtillis, 0,1-0,15 mm lata, margine foliorum 0,05-0,1 mm lato, bracteis 0,7-1,4 mm latis, pedicellis 0,3-0,5 mm longis, tubo corollae piloso-hispido, lobis corollae glabris non nisi ad apicem incrassatis, antheris aureo-luteis, fauce attingentibus, ovario dense tuberculato-papilloso, 4-dentato apice, stilo 2-2,3 mm longo, mericarpo dense tuberculato-papilloso differt.

Holotype: Sicily, Peloritani, Monte Scuderi, lungo il versante settentrionale, tra 900 e 1200 m di quota, 29-V-2007, Brullo C., Brullo S., Scuderi L. s.n. (CAT; isotypes, CAT, FI, MA).

**Etymology.** The specific epithet refers to “Peloritani”, the mountain range of north-eastern Sicily where the species occurs.

**Distribution.** This species is exclusive of the northern slopes of Mt. Scuderi (1253 m a.s.l.), a quite isolated peak of the Peloritani range (Fig. 4). In this area, it is represented by a population with several individuals (more than 300).

**Habitat.** *Asperula peloritana* grows on rocky sites characterized by Palaeozoic impure marble outcrops on north-facing, rather steep slopes (Fig. 6). It is a member of an orophilous dwarf-shrub community belonging to the *Cerastio-Astragalion nebrodensis* Pignatti & Nimis ex Brullo 1984, alliance of the *Rumici-Astragaletea siculi* Pignatti & Nimis 1980 class. According to Brullo & al. (2005), *A. peloritana* must be...
considered as characteristic species of the Plantagini humilis-Asperuletum peloritani Brullo & Guarino 2005 nom. corr. (= Plantagini humilis-Asperuletum gussonei Brullo & Guarino in Brullo & al. 2005). This association is exclusively found on the cacuminal area of Mt. Scuderi at an altitude of 1100-1250 m, within the supra-Mediterranean lower humid bioclimatic belt. Floristically it is characterized by the occurrence of many rare or endemic orophytes, such as Plantago humilis Guss., Linum punctatum C. Presl, Pimpinella tragium var. glauca Guss., Onosma canescens C. Presl, Acinos alpinus var. nebrodensis (Kern. & Strobl) Pignatti, Minuartia grandiflora C. Presl, Dianthus arrostii C. Presl, Centaurea parlitoris Heldr., Arabis rosea DC., etc.

Phenology. flowering May to early July.

Conservation status. For its restricted localization (ca. 15 ha) and for the intensive grazing (horses, cows and sheep) affecting the area at issue, Asperula peloritana requires the adoption of protective measures. In fact, for this serious threat and for the low number of individuals, we propose to include this species in the “Regional List of the Threatened Species” as critically endangered (CR). Based on the criteria adopted by IUCN (2001, 2003, 2005), it is proposed its inclusion in the following category: CR B1ab(ii, iii)+2ab(i, ii, iii).

Taxonomic remarks. For some morphological features, such as the leaf dimorphism, long internodes, hairy corolla, ovary and mericarp turbeculate-papillose, Asperula peloritana shows close relationships with A. suberosa Sibth. & Smith, rare endemism of Mt. Athos in N Greece (see Schonbeck-Temesy & Ehrendorfer, 1991). Therefore, these two species can be considered as paleoendemisms, likely arising from a common ancestor as a consequence of the speciation processes favoured by the geographical isolation. As concerns A. gussonei and A. peloritana, their remarkable morphological differences, such as their mericarp outer coat (Fig. 3), allow to hypothesize a different origin for the two species. In particular, they are probably linked to the existence of paleo-geographical land connections with the Balkan region as concern A. peloritana, and with the Sardo-Maghrebian territories with regard to A. gussonei.

Representative specimens

Asperula gussonei

Sicily: in elatioribus montosis, Madonie, s.d., Todaro 31 (FI); Madonie, s.d., Gussone s.n. (G-BOISS); Serra Cavallo, s.d., 1200-1500 m, Ricci s.n. (FI), in glareosis calcareis elatioribus montosis, Madonie, VII, Citarda 1431 (FI); in glareosis Serracavallo, Nebrod,
### Table 1. Comparative scheme of the morphological characters of *Asperula gussonei*, *A. peloritana* and allied species.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characters</th>
<th><em>A. gussonei</em></th>
<th><em>A. peloritana</em></th>
<th><em>A. pumila</em></th>
<th><em>A. nitida</em></th>
<th><em>A. suberosa</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stem</td>
<td>3-9 cm long</td>
<td>5-12 cm long</td>
<td>2-8 cm long</td>
<td>2-10 cm long</td>
<td>5-15(25) cm long</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internodes</td>
<td>1-4 mm long, shorter than leaves</td>
<td>4-10 mm long, the lower longer than leaves and the upper shorter than leaves</td>
<td>1-6 mm long, the lower shorter than leaves and the upper longer than the leaves</td>
<td>4-10 mm long, shorter than leaves</td>
<td>2-15 mm long, longer than leaves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaves</td>
<td>3-8 × 1-1.8 mm</td>
<td>the lower 3-6 × 1-1.5 mm and the upper 8-18 × 1.1-1.4 mm</td>
<td>1-5 × 0.5-0.8 mm</td>
<td>the lower 3-4 × 0.4-1 mm and the upper 6-12(16) × 0.5-1 mm</td>
<td>4-12 × 0.5-1 mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaf indumentum</td>
<td>glabrous</td>
<td>glabrous</td>
<td>hairy</td>
<td>glabrous to hairy</td>
<td>glabrous to densely hispid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaf colour</td>
<td>glaucous-pruinose</td>
<td>glaucous-pruinose</td>
<td>green</td>
<td>glaucous-pruinose</td>
<td>glaucous-pruinose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaf shape</td>
<td>narrowly elliptical</td>
<td>the lower lanceolate to obovate-lanceolate and the upper broadly linear</td>
<td>the lower ovate to ovate-oblong and the upper lanceolate to linear</td>
<td>the lower lanceolate-oblong to oblong and the upper linear</td>
<td>linear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaf apex</td>
<td>acute to apiculate</td>
<td>acute to apiculate</td>
<td>apiculate</td>
<td>aristate</td>
<td>obtuse to acuminate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaf midrib</td>
<td>0.4-0.6 mm wide, robust</td>
<td>0.10-0.15 mm wide, thin</td>
<td>0.3-0.5 mm wide, robust</td>
<td>0.35-0.75 mm wide, robust</td>
<td>0.3-0.7 mm wide, robust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaf margin</td>
<td>minutely serrulate-hispid</td>
<td>minutely serrulate-hispid</td>
<td>ciliate</td>
<td>ciliate</td>
<td>scabrid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bract</td>
<td>2-3 × 0.5-0.7 mm</td>
<td>2-4 × 0.7-1.4 mm</td>
<td>2-2.8 × 0.4-0.6 mm</td>
<td>3-4 × 0.7-1.4 mm</td>
<td>2-6 × 1-1.5 mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inflorescence</td>
<td>compact, 6-15-flowered</td>
<td>± loose, 6-15-flowered</td>
<td>± loose, 2-6-flowered</td>
<td>compact, 2-10-flowered</td>
<td>loose, 5-9-flowered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedicel</td>
<td>0.8-1.8 mm long</td>
<td>0.3-0.5 mm long</td>
<td>0.2-0.4 mm long</td>
<td>0.3-0.5 mm long</td>
<td>1-2 mm long</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corolla</td>
<td>6-8 mm long</td>
<td>6-7 mm long</td>
<td>4-5 mm long</td>
<td>5-7 mm long</td>
<td>5-10 mm long</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corolla indumentum</td>
<td>glabrous, smooth</td>
<td>hairy, hispid in the tube</td>
<td>hairy</td>
<td>glabrous, smooth</td>
<td>glabrous, hispid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corolla colour</td>
<td>pink to dark-pink</td>
<td>pink to dark-pink</td>
<td>pink to pink-purplish</td>
<td>pink</td>
<td>brownish-purple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corolla tube</td>
<td>4.5-5 mm long</td>
<td>4.5-5 mm long</td>
<td>3-3.5 mm long</td>
<td>4-5 mm long</td>
<td>5-6 mm long</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corolla lobes</td>
<td>1.8-2.5 mm long, ovate-ob lanceolate, thickened at the margin</td>
<td>2-2.5 mm long, ovate-lanceolate, thickened at the margin</td>
<td>1.5-2 mm long, ovate-lanceolate, thickened at the margin</td>
<td>1-2.3 mm long, triangular</td>
<td>2-3 mm long, oblong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anther</td>
<td>purplish, not reaching the throat</td>
<td>gold-yellowish, reaching the throat</td>
<td>purplish, not reaching the throat</td>
<td>purplish, exserted from the throat</td>
<td>purplish, exserted from the throat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mericarp</td>
<td>1.5-2.5 mm long</td>
<td>1.8-2.2 mm long</td>
<td>1.5-2 mm long</td>
<td>2.5-2.7 mm long</td>
<td>2-2.5 mm long</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mericarp outer coat</td>
<td>glabrous, minutely striate-sulcate</td>
<td>glabrous, densely tuberculate-papillose</td>
<td>papillose, sparsely hairy</td>
<td>papillose</td>
<td>tuberculate-hispid to verrucose</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Comparative scheme of the morphological characters of *Asperula gussonei*, *A. peloritana* and allied species.
Asperula peloritana

Sicily: Monte Scuderi, 13-VI-1828, Gussone s.n. (NAP-GUSS);
Monte Scuderi, 13-VI-1990, Bartolo, Brullo, Scelsi & Spampinato s.n. (CAT).

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