

Michael Briffa was born on 17th November 1926 and was first attracted to the local flora towards the end of the 60s, through the influence of three persons: Guido Lanfranco's radio programmes and his contagious love for flora and his 'Guide to the Flora of Malta'; the botanist Edwin Lanfranco, who was instrumental in Briffa's works, especially for solving identification problems; and his late old friend Mario Gauci, who introduced him to many local species of flora. Briffa's passion led to valuable knowledge to the scientific community on local vascular flora and mycoflora (particularly fungi and slime moulds) – with various new records of species for Malta, new localities for rare species and the rediscovery of species previously considered as possibly extinct.

Amongst his most renowned discoveries is the shrub *Sarcopoterium spinosum*, typical of the eastern phrygana, found for the first time in 1985; *Muscari commutatum*, a bulbous flowering plant first reported by him in 1983; and the buttercup *Ranunculus parviflorus* in 1985. Additional rediscoveries of important species include the Maltese dwarf hawksbeard, *Melitella pusilla*, first described from Malta in the early 20th century and rediscovered by him in 1983, and is now protected at international level, as well as the dog rose, *Rosa canina*, and the bugloss, *Echium sabulicola*, rediscovered after more than a century; the beaked spider orchid *Ophrys oxyrrhyncos*; and more than 40 other flowering plant species.

He also rediscovered the white-flowered form of the National Plant, the Maltese rock-centaury, *Palaeocyamus crassifolius*; such form was first included in the description of the species by Stefano Zerapha in 1827 but not found for decades.

In the 1980s, he also became interested in fungi (particularly wild mushrooms and toadstools), and later in 1995 in the related slime moulds. More than 300 fungal species were encountered during these studies, with several new records for Malta. Notable fungi include Amanita mushrooms; the polypore *Inonotus euphoriae*; as well as various species associations with oak/pine woodlands as well as rockrose phrygana. As to slime moulds and related species, Briffa compiled an annotated checklist of 71 species in 1997. Amongst the several rare species found are *Craterium rubronodum*, *Physarum echinosporum* and *Tubifera microsperma*, which were never recorded in the Mediterranean Region.

Most of the discoveries by Michael Briffa are included in the official 'Red Data Book for the Maltese Islands' issued by the precursor to the Environment & Resources Authority (ERA), and a good number of species are now protected by law, either directly as protected species or through the protection of their habitats through the Natura 2000 network and the related designation of Special Areas of Conservation and Tree Protection Areas by ERA.