

PREFACE

The Mythology of Plants is designed to provide enthusiasts of both mythology and the garden with a sampling of the numerous plants known and prized in ancient Greece and Rome. In those societies, all life—whether plant, animal, or human—was believed to be intimately connected with the divine; consequently the mythology of plants is a topic of enormous scope. It is curious that few books are dedicated to this subject; among those that are, even the best too often attempt to be all inclusive, listing the myths associated with various plants, but without relating the stories in any detail. This book, by contrast, limits its selection of plants to those species that feature in the *Metamorphoses*, an epic poem written by Ovid, the Roman poet who is among the finest and most celebrated storytellers of the classical world. In addition, the descriptions herein of gardens, plants, and myths are enhanced throughout by photographs of Greek painted vases, Pompeian gardens, and Roman frescoes and statuary; European paintings from the fifteenth century and later; and nineteenth-century botanical prints.

A brief introduction to the gardens, plants, and plant lore of ancient Greece and Rome provides the background necessary for appreciating the intimacy of the plant-human relationship found in classical culture. Thereupon follow the best known and most fully developed of Ovid's plant-related myths, grouped first by theme (to give some sense of the content and structure of Ovid's poem)—gods in love,

hubris and human excess, piety and devotion, and mortals in love—and then by plant. Each tale is prefaced with botanical information and an account of the plant's religious, medicinal, culinary, and other uses in antiquity. In these accounts Greek names for deities and heroes have been employed in references to Greek cultural contexts and literary works, while Roman names have been adopted for references to the culture and literature of Rome. The myths themselves are new prose translations by the author, made from Ovid's original Latin texts and incorporating creative license only when a literal translation could result in misreading or confusion. Ovid's poetic style is at once dramatic and learned. His scholarly allusions, as well as his use of second-person narration—he addresses the characters directly at particularly emotional or tense times in the stories—have been preserved. Finally, the plant-associated myths that Ovid recounts briefly or mentions only in passing are grouped alphabetically by plant, without organization by theme, in the section entitled *A Guided Walk through Ovid's Garden*.

In order to assist the reader's navigation of this garden of myth, a map of the ancient Mediterranean world and a glossary, which includes the most frequently mentioned names (those of gods and of ancient authors) and relatively obscure geographic and mythological references in Ovid's poem, are provided. These are supplemented by notes identifying direct references to the writings of other ancient authors. Each book in the list of sources was consulted in the preparation of this work, and all are suitable references for readers wishing to delve more deeply into this subject.