

# Marie Louis Emberger (1897 – 1969)

Louis Emberger was born in France at Thann, on the Upper Rhine, on 23 January 1897. The seeds of his future career were sown early, initiated and encouraged by his father's interest in the flora of his homeland, and the excursions they made together to the plains of Alsace and the mountains of Vosges and Jura. When Alsace was returned to France in 1918 at the end of the First World War Louis modified his plans, and instead of continuing his tertiary studies at Strasbourg, went to Lyon, where he had family ties. He worked as a technician while studying natural sciences for his BA at the faculty of medicine and pharmacy, and graduated in 1920. The following year he presented his PhD thesis on fern cytology, for which he was awarded the Science Academy's Desmazières Prize. He then taught botany at the University of Montpellier.

In 1923 he was appointed director of botany at the Moroccan Scientific Institute and professor at the Moroccan Institute of Advanced Studies in Rabat. During his thirteen years there he conducted a prodigious amount of research, surveying the vegetation across the country – desert, wetland, high summits and ancient forest – and quickly became the pre-eminent ecologist in Morocco. He returned to France, and in 1937 was appointed to the chair of botany at Montpellier, where he worked with Charles Flauhault and other eminent botanists.

He had studied with Professor Flauhault before he went to Morocco, and married his daughter. Emberger later founded the prestigious Institute of Botany and the influential CEPE (plant sociology and ecology research centre). Throughout his career and until his death in 1969 he maintained a strong interest in North Africa, publishing widely on the region's plant ecology, and for 20 years he was UNESCO's expert on the world's arid areas.

After the Second World War Emberger's interest turned towards the preservation and better utilisation of natural resources; he contributed to environmental planning and public awareness and mapped the plant groups of the whole of France. He was a mine of information, much of it original, and his more than 250 publications ranged from magazines to hefty tomes. Recognised, not only in France but also in foreign countries, his honours included an honorary doctorate in 1960 from the University of Geneva. Disciples, students and friends set up a scientific society named in his honour, and in 1965 Dr Loutfy Boulou of Alexandria University, Egypt, identified and named a new plant genus *Embergeria* after him. Described as accessible and kind to lay people, with Christian sentiments given discreetly, Louis Emberger was highly regarded for both his scientific expertise and his human qualities

## *Embergeria grandifolia*

*Embergeria* is a genus of two coastal herbs, one each from Australia and New Zealand, previously included with the other sow thistles in the genus *Sonchus*. *Embergeria grandifolia* ('with large-leaves') is endemic to the Chatham Islands, where it grows sporadically on sand dunes, coastal ledges and clay promontories. It is a thistle-like herb with stout rhizomes, milky sap, and pale green fleshy leaves irregularly divided into toothed lobes. Erect flower heads with light purple to pale yellow florets are borne from December to February. Animal browsing has severely depleted this species, and *Puccinia embergeriae*, a rust fungus known only on *Embergeria grandifolia*, may also have declined with its host.

