

Wild Romanian Herbs - Therapeutic Benefits and Culinary Uses

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INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of humankind, plants have played a significant role place for edible and therapeutic purposes. It is known that plants are used for their nutrient or curative properties

There are various records which attest that plants have always been essential for human's evolution [1-18]. Actually, around the world there has been an herbal ancient medicine tradition. Among these can be mentioned the Chinese, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Islamic, Indian and European Herbalism.

Natural compounds are has a very long tradition in Romania. Moreover, since ancient times, there are documents that certify that the Dacians have knowledge of the curative properties of different types of endemic plants on the current territory of Romania [3-11].

However, in Romania, the plants were not only used in traditional medicine but also for food preparation [3-10]. Thus, in the time of our ancestors, a large number of these plants, which today are considered medicinal, were consumed for cooking, less known or even forgotten. For instance, energy drinks from roots of: *Taraxacum officinalis*, *Agropyron repens* or *Typha angustifolia*. The leaves of many wild plants (*Althaea officinalis*, *Taraxacum officinalis*, *Bellis perennis*, *Prunella vulgaris*, *Boranga officinalis*, *Heracleum sphondylium*, *Portulaca oleraceae*) are used to prepare salads [3,4,8-10,12]. The roots of *Typha angustifolia* were obtained very popular pickles. And from the flour from *Typha angustifolia* were bakes different cookies. Also, from the roots of *Chaerophyllum bulbosum* because of its chestnut-like taste were cooked in different ways: ciulama, soups, fried.

The tehnological revolution and of course the development of industrial agriculture had a direct consequence on human food habits. Most often, modern life means stress and unhealthy food habits: fast food or processed foods that most often abound in chemical preserving agents, food dyes, food

flavor enhancers. And the long-term effects are emergence of serious illness. Another side effect was: the introducing new foods, adopting culinary recipes taken from other cultures that have been replaced the old Romanian traditional dishes.

A concrete example is the millet, the pseudo-cereal which for hundreds of years was a basic food on the territory of Romania. The Dacians were considered as large millet consumers [1,5-10]. The positive effects of nutrition rich in millet on the human body are currently recognized in modern medicine, given that high content of vitamins (A, B2, B5, PP) and minerals such as: Zn, P, Mn, Cu, K, Mg, Si and Fe. And more important, millet does not contain gluten [5-14]. However, in the 17th-18th centuries the Romanian diet has changed in that corn almost totally replaces millet, especially due to superior productivity. And the better taste of corn had a decisive role. Must be mentioned that corn not only has a lower content of vitamins, and in the absence of a correct food association led to the appearance of the pelagre, a commun disease in 19th century among the Romanian peasants [3-5,8,9].

Wide use of edible weeds represents another feature of Romanian archaic cuisine and in particular, different plants from spontaneous flora very appreciated for their curative and nutrition properties. Although in modern food many of these have disappeared, there are still places in Romania where the old culinary preparations were preserved. Some of

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these plants are summarized below [1-10,12].

Alliaria officinalis (Brassicaceae) is also known as garlic grass or garlic-mustard due to its pregnant favour of garlic is used as seasoning agents in salads, sauces. The plant root has a taste similar to horseradish. The main curative properties are: disinfectant, diuretic, antiseptic [3-5,8,9].

Chenopodium album (Amaranthaceae) or wild spinach is widely used in cooking from centuries. It is used for different dishes: omelettes, soups, tarts, pies. In facts, the wild spinach pie is culinary specialty from the south of Romania. Inflorescence is used as a substitute for broccoli. And the seeds can be prepared similar to quinoa. The plant has a high content of Ca and vitamins: A, C, K. The plant infusion is used as digestive anti-inflammatory, relieving menopausal symptoms [3-5,8,9].

Portulaca oleraceae (Portulacaceae) known as fat grass or pig's grass. Medicinal uses refers in: vitamin C deficiency, diuretic, analgesic, anti-inflammatory, urinary infections, hepatitis. Modern chemical screening has shown that a very complex chemical composition (highly content of omega 3 fatty acid, vitamins: C, E, B, PP; minerals: Ca, Fe, Mg, Mn, Se, K; proteins). And the biomedical studies have been highlighted more other health benefits such as: of this plant are antifungal, antioxidant properties, anti-diabetic, etc. [3-5,8,9,19-21].

The Dacians considered it to be an elixir plant. They called lax or iaca and used as food and medicinal plant [6,10]. It one of the 21 plants mentioned by Discorides in his paper, "De Materia medica" [11]. The purslane stem, leaves and flowers are consumed to obtain various dishes: salads, soups, stews, pies.

Tussilago farfara (Compositae) commonly known as coltsfoot is an herb valued since ancient time in traditional medicine to treat cough. Also it is recommended asthenia, different digestive (gastritis, constipation and diarrhea) and dermatological disorders (phlebitis, burns, boils, etc.). In Romanian tradition kitchen, coltsfoot has used to prepare rolls, sarmale, soups, salads, pies, puree, pies [3-5,8,9,12].

Amaranthus retroflexus (Amaranthaceae) or pigweed was consumed as pseudo-cereal since a very long time. Recent studies have showed the herb complex chemical composition: polyunsaturated fats, essential amino acids (high content of lysine and methionine), minerals (Mg, K, Zn, Ca, Fe and Cu), vitamins (A, B, E, C and K), carotenoids, etc. Pigweed represents a well-known ingredient with a taste similar to spinach. The most known dish recipes include: soups, salads. These soups are very appreciated in eastern Romania [3-5,8,9,12,22].

The seeds are a great source of highly quality proteins. There are consumed raw or baked. The powder obtained from seed represents a cereal flour substitute not containing gluten.

Humulus lupulus (Cannabaceae) or hop is an edge forest native plant in temperate region.

Although it is much more familiar as an essential component in brewing process, hop has been used for a very long time in traditional medicine for its health benefits: diuretic, sedative, astringent, estrogenic and increasing appetite. The research has confirmed that secondary metabolites identified in hop shown these health benefits and even more. Lately studies highlighted the antiviral and anti-tumoral properties [23-30]. There is only little information related to the culinary application of the plant. A reasonable explication can be its strong bitter taste. However, there are old culinary recipes especially in west region of Romania, where from buds and young leaves are prepared: puree, soups and salads [3-5,8,9,12].

The origin of these odd foods is lost in the darkness of the time. And there are nothing else but a real proof of the moment when there was a perfect balance between man and nature. Our ancestors knew that food mean health. Science basically offers a reconfirmation of traditional medicine and highlights the tremendous importance of herbs for human sustainable development. And the revival and promotion of old dishes based on wild herbs could represent an important step to recovery forgotten traditions in which virtually every ingredient was a medicine.

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