

A NOTE ON WILD MARJORAM (*Origanum vulgare* L.)

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The name *Origanum* is derived from two Greek words: "oros" means mountain and "ganos" means joy, an allusion to the gay appearance those plants give to the hillsides on which they grow.

Habitat: *Origanum vulgare* L. is generally distributed over Asia, Europe, North Africa and England. In England and U.P. Himalaya in India this herb grows commonly.

Description: It is a perennial herb, with creeping roots, sending up woody stems about a foot high, branched above often purplish. The leaves are opposite, petiolate, about an inch long, nearly entire, hairy beneath. The flower are in corymbs, with reddish bracts, a two-lipped pale purple corolla, and a five toothed calyx, blooming from the variety with white flowers and light-green stalks, another with variegated leaves. It is propagated by division of roots in the autumn.

Uses

i. **Medicine:** This herb is used as a remedy for narcotic poisons, convulsions and dropsy. Its properties are stimulant, carminative, diaphoretic and mildly tonic; a useful emmenagogue. It is so acrid that it has been employed not only as a rubefacients, and often as a liniment, but has also been used as a caustic by farriers. A few drops, put on cotton-wool and placed in the hollow of an aching tooth frequently relieves the pain. In the commencement of measles, it is useful in producing a gentle perspiration and bringing out the eruption, being given in the form of a warm infusion, which is also valuable in spasms, colic, and to give relief from pain in dyspeptic complaints (Jain, 1987; Kala and Rawat, in press).

ii. **Perfume and scent:** The whole plant has a strong, peculiar, fragrant, balsamic odour and a warm, bitterish, aromatic taste, both of which properties are preserved when the herb is dry. It yields by distillation with water a small quantity of volatile oil, which may be seen in vesicles, on holding up the leaves between the eye and the light, and which is the chief source of its properties as a medicinal agent. The tops when immersed in the table beer, give an aromatic flavour to the beer. Before the introduction of the hops they were as much in demand for ale-brewing as the ground ivy or wood sage.

iii. **Dye:** The flowering tops yield a dye, formerly used to dye woollen cloth purple, and linen a reddish brown, but the tint is neither brilliant nor durable.

iv. **Food:** Large quantities of it are still gathered and hung up to dry in cottages for making tea.

v. **Fodder:** Goat and sheep eat this herb, but horses are not fond of it, and cattle reject it.

vi. **Religion:** Marjoram has a very ancient medicinal reputation. The Greeks used it extensively, both internally and externally for fomentations (Grieve and Leyel, 1992). Among the Greeks if Marjoram grew on the grave, it augured the happiness of the departed and among both the Greeks and Romans, it was the custom to crown young couples with Marjo-

ram (Grieve and Leyel, 1992). This herb is offered to Lord Vishnu and Siva in the famous Hindu shrines of India at Badrinath and Kedarnath. Some saints in India make the garland of its seeds and then offer to Lord Vishnu at Badrinath.

Adulteration: Red oil of Thyme is also frequently imported and sold under the name of oil of *Origanum*. It is often adulterated with oils of turpentine, spike lavender and rosemary, and coloured with alkanet root, and is not infrequently more or less destitute of Thymol (Grieve and Leyel, 1992).

Collection, cultivation and conservation: In India this herb is collected frequently from the adjacent areas of Badrinath and Kedarnath for both medicinal and religious purpose. Local people use to make garland of this herb and sell them in the market which costs vary from Rs. 2 to Rs. 100 based on the size and weight of garland. In Europe this herb is collected from wild for perfumery as well as for therapeutic values (Grieve and Leyel, 1992).

This herb is cultivated in high altitude villages of Himalaya by resident people, and some saints for their own use. Local people sell it at a large scale in the local market. When cultivated, the leaves are more elliptical in shape than the Wild Marjoram and the flower spike thinner and more compact. Marjoram has an extensive use for culinary purposes, as well as in medicine, but it is the cultivated species.

Although, this herb is not listed in the Red Data Book and it is abundant in the sub-alpine forests and meadows of U.P. Himalaya in India but its indiscriminate collection from the wild especially for religious purposes may be the serious threat in future for the existing population of this herb. The number of pilgrims in Badrinath and Kedarnath is increasing day by day and to fulfil the need of this herb to such a large number of pilgrims obviously force local people for its overcollection resulted the loss of its population in the wild. If this trend of collection will continue then this herb may become locally rare or extinct. It is felt that its cultivation should be promoted so that pressure on wild population can be mitigated and local people can meet their requirements too.

References

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