

## Garden cure

DARSHAN SHANKAR *in association with Kalpavriksh National Biodiversity Action and Strategy Plan*

Indian medicines make use of plants in a big way. The challenge now is to build a bridge between modern medical systems and traditional ones.

MOHAMMED YOUSUF



Who has not heard about plants like *Tulsi* (*Ocimum tenuiflorum*), *Neem* (*Azadirachta indica*), *Bilva* (*Aegle marmelos*), the *Durva Grass* (*Cynodon dactylon*), *Brahmi* (*Bacopa monnieri*), *Khus* (*Vetiveria zizanioides*), *Haldi* (*Curcuma longa*), *Jeera* (*Cuminum cyminum*), *Dhania* (*Coriandrum sativum*), *Amla* (*Phyllanthus emblica*), *Katha* (*Acacia catechu*)?

These 11 plants are examples of the 8,000-odd species of native medicinal plants known to the Indian people and these are referred to by more than 2,00,000 local names, in different parts of the country.

The naming of the plants follows an interesting cultural pattern. Plants that are of high medicinal values have many synonyms (as many as 100) across their range of distribution and little used plants have few names. The names may refer to habitat, *giri-mallika* (*Holarrhena pubescens*), which means growing around hillsides or a morphological feature *saptaparni* (*Alstonia scholaris*), which means seven leafed, or a sensory characteristic, *Amla* (*Phyllanthus emblica*), which means sour taste and so on. The names are a source of information and it would be a pity, if these vernacular names were substituted by dry scientific (Latin) names that, although based on universally accepted rules and serving a scientific purpose, are nevertheless culturally "dry".



India has both diverse oral health traditions specific to both ecosystems and ethnic communities as well as written (codified) health knowledge embodied in the literature of four major Indian systems of medicine — Ayurveda, Unani, Sidha and Gso-rig-pa. Statistics indicate that folk medicine, across the different bio-geographic regions uses around three times more plants than those used in the codified traditions.

Analysis of habit-wise distribution of medicinal plants indicates that a little more than one-third are trees. Herbs form around one-third of the population. Shrubs and climbers form a little more than one-third of the total. If we analyse the distribution of medicinal plants shows that they are distributed across diverse habitats and landscapes. Around 70 per cent of India's medicinal plants are found in the tropical areas mostly in the various forest types spread across the Western and Eastern Ghats, the Vindhya, the Chotta Nagpur plateau, Aravalis, the Terai region in the foothills of Himalayas and the North East. Less than 30 per cent are found in the temperate and alpine areas of higher altitudes, which include species of high medicinal value. A small number of medicinal plants is also found in aquatic habitats and mangroves.

The traditional knowledge of medicinal plants is profound. Broadly the uses of plants can be classified in three ways — to prevent diseases, to cure diseases and to enhance health. The plant properties in the Indian tradition were discovered through a method in the Indian tradition from that of Western science. This is described in traditional textbooks as *Dravya Guna Shastra* or science of the property of the materials.

The challenge for Indian scientists is to develop intercultural bridges between *Dravya Guna Shastra* and modern pharmacology.

Such bridges can only be built when there is mutual respect and scientists feel that they own the indigenous knowledge as much as they own modern science.



The *vaidyas*, *hakkims* and *siddhas* are only the carriers of traditional knowledge, but all Indians are its owners.

**What you can do:**

Design a home herbal garden of 15 to 20 plants, mostly herbs, grasses, shrubs and perhaps one or two trees choosing eco-system specific species whose uses are known to local households, folk healers, *Vaidyas*, *Hakkims*, *Siddhas*, or *Amchis* in your locality.

*The author is the Director, Foundation for Revitalisation of Local Health traditions, Bangalore*