
Women and Knowledge of Medicinal Forest Plants

In the framework of the South American Medicinal Plants Network, the Uruguayan Centre for the Study of Appropriate Technologies (CEUTA) is coordinating a collective activity for the recovery of traditional knowledge on the use of plants as medicine and as food.

We want to tell you about the experience of a group of women, gathered together since November 2002, when we held the first meeting on Women's Cycles and Natural Medicine. At this first meeting, we shared visions and knowledge of plants that help us to keep healthy, considering the various stages of our feminine cycles.

We carried out an awareness-raising activity centred on our relationship with food and with our power to heal. We personally experienced the diversity and respectful dialogue of knowledge because women from the various corners of the country were gathered, having different occupations and situations (rural women, midwives, sexologists, herbalists, members of community groups).

Nelly Curbelo, one of the participants recalls: "We started in November 2002. Previously each one of us in our locations had worked with plants collected in our areas, remembering knowledge that has existed for a very long time: which were the uses for health and the important food input. At the first meeting the theme was feminine health in all its phases, folk knowledge, very deeply rooted traditions –some perhaps erroneous, but no doubt containing much wisdom– transmitted to us by our grandmothers and those before them, old women, herb doctors, and women who know how to live better and more healthily, using plants.

We reflected on the cycles of the moon and all the physical and spiritual harmony that we have in us and that surrounds us, that can make our existence a sacred temple to be cared for.

Closer in time, all this wealth has been set aside in the name of conventional medicine. It is for this reason that we want to restore that wise knowledge that is sometimes hard to reach because the people who have it are wary of "opening up" until they are sure of our good intentions and also because they have been devalued or, what is also sad, people have taken the knowledge of humble and ordinary people and made a profit out of it."

At the second meeting in May 2003, we worked on the relationship we have with folk, traditional and university knowledge, the way in which each type of knowledge is received, the privileged opportunities for each knowledge, their own rationale and the relationship among them all. We had in-depth conversations on the relationship between the official health system in the region and the use of medicinal plants, community and folk experience, research and experience of folk knowledge in Uruguay and Argentina, their implications and results.

In December 2003, our third meeting was held in the forest along a river. The forest was our shelter and our inspiration to share both personal and group research on our native plants, to work on folk botanical descriptions, on traditional recipes and to exchange experiences on restoration and recovery of the opportunity to use indigenous flora.

Nelly continues with the story: "We met around the fire. The canopy of coronilla (*Scutia buxifolia*), rama negra (*Senna corymbosa*), guayabo colorado (*Myrcianthes cisplatensis*) and tala (*Celtis spinosa*) did what it could to protect us from the fine rain that from time to time was accompanied by the wind. There was a feeling, indecipherable to me, a mixture of spiritual grandeur and earthly safety. We enjoyed the silence full of messages, the nearby crystalline and untiring river, the silenced night elves, also the frogs and crickets leaving time and space to us.

At each of the meetings we learnt more, not only because of the subject that we were addressing, but also because intuitively and instinctively we captured feelings, knowledge, conclusions, that enrich, strengthening values, opening doors and leaving it clear that we are all at the same time teachers and students.

We started the first activity of the second day: before breakfast, inhaling that special forest aroma in the quiet morning, each one of us in silence, walking alone, choosing a route, observing suspended in time, going back too, until you feel chosen or you choose a grass, a shrub or a tree, and using your senses with all the love Mother Nature gives us.

Once I found "my plant" I sat next to it, feeling its texture, its smell, its taste if it lets me, the form of its stems, its leaves, if it has flowers, fruit, what its surroundings are like, which way it is oriented, if it is alone or has offspring, what other species accompany it and if they are complementary, the type of soil, seeing whether it prefers the sun, half shade or very shady spots or the caress of water. Perhaps I try to feel a bit like the plant, to share its knowledge and how much I can take of its life for my existence and health. I know I can only offer it care, respect and admiration, and if its contribution or message to me is silence: respect it with all the tenderness that led me to choose it.

This was a beautiful task. Once concluded we met to share our experience.

When we talked and shared this personal experience, such rich and valuable contributions were made by the other companions that they greatly enriched our previous knowledge.

When we are in syntony with our surroundings, living these meetings so intensely, we always feel moved and the time goes by and there is no time to be measured."

This meeting was yet another input to the reactivation of the memory of the forest, which many of our ordinary country people hold, sharing their profound love for the places that they endeavour to shelter from depredating attacks. Thus, we gather the different contributions of women and men regarding knowledge and practices related with the good use and conservation of our ecosystems and environments. Thus, we are building up a folk pharmacopoeia on the forest.

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