

ETHNOBOTANICAL STUDIES IN DOBROGEA

F. TUDOR, MIHAELA IOANA GEORGESCU

University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Bucharest

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Abstract

A field study was conducted in the commune of Niculițel to record the knowledge of the inhabitants of different plants and their uses. A legend link to the name of this commune is known by the village elders and it is also recorded.

INTRODUCTION

Ancient traditions and customs are the most valuable knowledge we receive from generation to generation and that we can give them further. The research of these enables "... to link the thread of today's life to the most far off ways of living, insufficient revealed by the prehistoric archaeological data " and thus "to complete the image of bygone times the evidence still held in the deed and consciousness of the contemporary human" [9].

Dobrogea, as seen in historical and geographical perspective, is a place to "... temporary or permanent establishment of economic or religious groups, or simply due to chance of the times", becoming "...a model of coexistence and interconnections, on the same territory, of groups of populations from a diversity rarely seen in Europe" [8]. Ethnobotanical research in such a complex area comes to emphasize the knowledge of the traditional use of plants for therapeutic purposes, in various household chores or in holidays, some of them found in other parts of the country also, others specifically to this region.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study was conducted in Tulcea County, in the Niculițel commune and consisted in carrying out interviews with local people: Cărbunaru Ana (CA), aged 67 years, of Russian origin (Lippovan); Ioana Tudor (TI 1), aged 82 years, of Romanian origin; Niculache Varvara (NV), aged 74 years, of Romanian origin; Tudor Ion (TI 2), aged 84 years, of Romanian origin. The data from the questionnaire were grouped according to categories of plant uses, stating in each case the person (s) from which they were obtained. The similarities or differences on plant uses in other parts of the country were highlight with referenced of the work of the Ethnobotanical Romanian Encyclopedia [1]. Scientific names are according to Illustrated Flora of Romania [3].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Niculițel commune (Tulcea County) is located in the E-NE of the Niculițel plateau (Figure 1), at the foot of the hill Sarica, in the area of the river Telița spring (Figure 1). Artifacts belonging to the Dacians (IV - III BC), and to the Roman (II - VII AD), were discovered in this places. In 1971 were discovered the ruins of a Christian basilica, from Roman period, built of bricks in the late fourth century. In the altar was found a tomb that housed the relics of martyrs Zotikos, Attalos, Kanasis and Philippos persecuted in the years 369-372 by Visigoth king Atanaric; their names were written in red on the walls of the tomb. The relics were buried in 1973, in the basilica of the Coces Monastery [4].



Fig. 1. Niculițel commune - general view

Legend says that the commune name comes from a young shepherd, Niculiță, who, while he was looking after their sheep on a hill, in the highest point of this, begins to dig a hole in the ground. First, he discovers a piece of iron, and then continuing the excavation, revealed that the piece of metal was part of a cross. The inhabitants, seeing what the young shepherd boy has discovered, continued the excavations and found an intact church, which was covered with earth about 1,000 years ago, owing to migrants fear. Following this discovery, the young shepherd names was given to the village (the author collected this legend from village elders).

The data obtained from field surveys were grouped by the use of plants in the following categories:

A. Herbs:

Potatoes (sliced) (*Solanum tuberosum* L.): for sore throat (CA).

Tubers, cut slices, place in bundle on the forehead and temples against headache. From the heap baked potatoes, peeled and blended with oil, were made flat cakes which tie around the neck against quinsy [1].

Sea buckthorn (*Hippophaë rhamnoides* L.): for liver pain, immunity (CA). *In Encyclopedia of Romanian ethnobotany there are no indications on the use of this plant of medicinal purposes [1].*

Onions (cooked) (*Allium cepa* L.): to treat boils (CA).

It was one of the most popular remedies. The bulb is crushed or cooked and used against strikes and boils [1].

Wild Thyme (*Thymus* L.)¹: for maintaining normal blood pressure (NV).

None of the species listed below are in the Encyclopedia of Romanian ethnobotany [1].

Cherry (*Cerasus avium* (L.) Moench) (stalks): to treat kidney problems (CA).

Cherry stalks are used almost everywhere for kidney disease [1].

Horse tail (*Equisetum arvense* L.): to treat heart and stomach problems (NV).

Sterile strains had a wide use almost everywhere, due to diuretic and astringent properties [1].

Yarrow (*Achillea* L.): is used to treat liver problems (NV).

Floriferous tips tea is also used in kidney disease, liver and to nerve strengthening [1].

Marigold (*Calendula officinalis* L.): to treat liver problems (CA, NV).

The plant should be boiled in wine, which is taken against icterus [1].

Quince (*Cydonia oblonga* Mill.) (Leaves): to treat stomach problems (CA).

Tea leaves mixed with lime flowers, were taken in tonsillitis and colds. Dried tea leaves were used in heart diseases, or in cases of heart failure [1].

Horse radish (*Armoracia rusticana* P. Gaertn., B. Mey. et Scherb.): is used against colds (CA).

Leaves and rhizomes of the plant were used as a cure for headaches, in various forms ... Tea leaves, sweetened with honey, were taken against cold [1].

Dog-rose (*Rosa canina* L.) (flowers): in maintaining normal blood pressure (CA).

There are no indications on the medicinal use of flowers in the Encyclopedia of Romanian ethnobotany [1].

Spearmint, peppermint (*Mentha x piperita* L.): used in stomach pain (CA, NV, TI1, TI2).

¹According to the Illustrated Flora of Romania [3], in Dobrogea grow spontaneously specimens of *Thymus zygoides*, *T. comptus*, *T. callieri*, *T. glabrescens*, *T. sibthorpii*, *T. pannonicus*

It were taken many times, knead in spirit, in diseases of the stomach. Tea was given to children against colic [1].

Chamomile (*Matricaria recutita* L.): used in eyes lavement (CA), stomach pain, poisoning (NV), irritation (TI1, TI2).

Decoction was used liked lavement and cataplasm against headaches. Against ear pain was made exhalation or lavement with the decoction of flowers. It was used to care wounds, sores, bumps, and abscess. Everywhere is used in stomach diseases [1].

Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale* Weber ex F.H.Wigg.): is used for weight loss, and to eliminate toxins (TI).

The tea leaves were taken, in some places, to blood renewed [1].

Wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium* L.): for gynecologic affections (CA).

Among, it was the most important plants used in folk medicine. Wormwood tea was used against colds and baths against rheumatism and paralysis. Decoction is used in women's diseases [1].

St. John's Wort (*Hypericum perforatum* L.): to treat liver and stomach problems (NV).

Floriferous stems teas were taken in cough, sweat, colds, and sore stomach, liver or kidney diseases [1].

Sloes (*Prunus spinosa* L.): is used to treat heart problems (TI 2).

The decoction of yellow under bark slime was used to treat heart pain [1].

Maize (*Zea mays* L.) (silk): to treat stomach problems (TI 1).

Corn silk tea was taken as a diuretic and to treat the calculus [1].

Castor bean (*Ricinus communis* L.): to treat constipation, and to increased hair and nails (CA).

As a purgative, it took three or six seed put in milk or crushed and mixed with sour milk. It gave, also crushed to the animals [1].

Smoke tree (*Cotinus coggygria* Scop.): for the treatment of open wounds (CA, NV, TI 2), to treat gynecological problems (TI 1).

Sprout decoction were used to wash the throat in perished (syphilis) diesis, and the remnants were used in cataplasm [1].

Common elder (*Sambucus nigra* L.): is used for rest, quiet (TI).

Flower tea is taken cough and respiratory diseases [1].

Linden (*Tilia tomentosa* Moench) (flowers): is used for headaches (NV), resting, and sleeping (TI 1).

Lime Tea with St. John's Wort is takes against pain heart. It may be used in neurological diseases, headaches, dizziness and indigestion [1].

Garlic (*Allium sativum* L.): is used against colds (CA).

It was one of the most important remedies used by old women. Typical, it was used as a sauce against the indigestion, abdominal pain, influenza, headache, or intestinal worms [1].

White cabbage (*Brassica oleracea* L. convar. *capitata* (L.) Alef): is used to treat rheumatism (CA).

Leaves, blanched or pickled, were put on frostbite, scalds, and burns [1].

B. Tinctorial plants (for dyeing)

Onion (*Allium cepa* L.) (peel): it is used for dyeing, the resulting color is orange (CA, NV, TI, Ti).

Beetroot (*Beta vulgaris* L. var. *conditiva* Alef.): is used for pigmentation of the various dishes, the resulting color is red-purple (CA).

Nut (*Juglans regia* L.) (shell): for hair dye, the resulting color is reddish brown (CA, NV).

Stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica* L.): it is used for dyeing Easter eggs, the resulting color is green (CA).

Quince (*Cydonia oblonga* Mill.): the resulting color is beige (NV).

Lime (*Tilia tomentosa* Moench) (flowers): the resulting color is brown (TI).

Mulberry tree (*Morus* L.) (wood): the resulting color is yellow. Pigmentation is used for alcohol, by maintaining it in barrels of mulberry wood (TI 2).

B. Plants used in holydays

Willow (*Salix alba* L.) (sprout): they are used to represent the crown of olive twigs resting on Our Saviour's head when He was entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (CA, NV, TI 1, TI 2).

Walnut tree (*Juglans regia* L.) (leaves): they are used at Pentecost (CA, NV, TI 1, TI 2).

Wild Thyme (*Thymus* L.) (grass of God) is used at Pentecost (CA).

Lime (*Tilia tomentosa* Moench) (sprout): is used at Whit Sunday (NV).

Basil (*Ocimum basilicum* L.): is used in most Orthodox Christmas (CA, NV, TI 1, TI 2).

Comparing data from field interviews with those found in the literature on this subject [1, 2, 5, 6, 7] shows that the usefulness of 6 plants among the 24 species of medicinal uses is specific to Niculițel commune: sea buckthorn, wild thyme, quince, dog-rose, castor bean, common elder. Of the seven species listed for dyeing stinging nettle (leaves), quince (leaves), limes (flowers) are used in original recipes. A specific feature for Niculițel commune is to use the walnut leaves, the thyme field, or lime sprout for different religious holidays.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Niculișel village has its own legend about the origin of their name.
2. There were recorded 24 species of plants with medicinal uses, 7 species for dyeing and 5 species used for religious holidays.
3. Knowledge about six of medicinal species, three of dyeing species and three of plants use for holidays is specific to Niculișel commune.

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