

KNOWLEDGE AND USE OF MEDICINAL AND ALIMURGICAL PLANTS



Interview with Francesco Veltri, a lover of nature. After graduating in natural sciences, he was a substitute teacher; in the Public Administration, trainer and employee at FORMEZ (Service, Assistance, Studies and Training Center); Officer at the Calabria Region with commands in ARSAC, mountain communities; finally, in charge of the FOREST DISTRICT, work carried out with great passion until retirement age.

- Dear Mr. Veltri, the treasure you propose is part of the knowledge and popular customs regarding practical medicine, i.e. the use of natural medicinal plants which, before the advent of chemistry and the pharmaceutical industry, were the basis of medical treatment. In this regard, could you explain what is meant by "medicinal" plants and "alimurgic" plants?

-The term "**officinale**" derives from an ancient cultural and historical tradition intended to remember the "workshops" of the apothecaries, also present in the ancient monasteries, today known as "pharmaceutical laboratories", where the plants were subjected to various processes (drying, trituration, maceration, distillation, extraction, etc.) in order to make them usable in their various purposes. Law No. 66 of 1931, however, further specified that "officinal" plants are all medicinal, aromatic and perfume plants whose derivatives can be used as supplements, cosmetics, drugs, veterinary products, etc. The term "**alimurgico**" (from "alimenta urgentia" "to seek nourishment in cases of food necessity") refers to edible plants that grow spontaneously in natural environments (countryside, hills, mountains, etc.). Alimurgic plants in the past, especially in times of famine and wars, ensured the food survival of the populations. Now they are harvested for pleasure, for taste and for health purposes, the most common are chicory, nettle, purslane, borage, mallow... etc.

-Was the discovery of the healing properties of plants, therefore, well known since ancient and remote times?

-The primitive man, from the very beginning, found in the plant the nourishing food, the garment, the shelter, the work tool, the source of heat, cosmetics, perfumes and also of course medicine. From a historical point of view it can be said that all medicine has its origins in the science of medicinal plants.

- Given that medicine has its origins in the science of medicinal plants, when did people begin to understand its health qualities?

-The first records on the use of plants for curative purposes are lost in the mists of time. The most ancient written documents belong to the Chinese civilization: famous is the herbarium of the father of Chinese medicine and inventor of acupuncture Shen-Nung, dating back to 2700 BC. which

contains the description of 2000 medicinal plants and 8000 herbal prescriptions. The foundations of our Western medical culture can be found in Egypt. In fact, the oldest manuscript on natural medicine is a papyrus (1550 BC) which contains about 876 herbal formulas based on more than 500 plants. Subsequently, herbal knowledge spread throughout the West, always deeply influenced by Egyptian and Mesopotamian knowledge. In Greece even the recipes of perfumes and medicines were engraved on marble slabs, near the temples, so that everyone could have access to them.

- In view of the evolution of pharmaceutical chemistry, which manages to synthesize and then build the molecules used later in the preparation of modern drugs in the laboratory, does it not seem out of the ordinary for you to continue talking about medicinal plants?

-Pharmaceutical chemistry has certainly made great strides in the mass production of the many molecules used in modern medicine, however, one important detail should not be overlooked, namely that the synthesis of these new molecules always starts from the active ingredients present in medicinal plants, therefore their importance remains unchanged.

-Your interest in the world of nature, more particularly in regard to medicinal plants, what does it derive from and what methods do you propose or adopt for the conservation of this treasure?

-I had the pleasure of graduating in Natural Sciences, for which the wonderful world of nature such as botany, zoology, geology and mineralogy was the subject of my study. The sector of medicinal plants, on the other hand, has always intrigued and passionate me, also thanks to the stories of my grandmother who was always ready with her herbs and natural medicines to solve any health problem such as cough, cold, stomach ache, back ache, etc., thanks to her strong knowledge of medicinal herbs and, mainly, to her precise familiarity with their use, preparation and storage. To safeguard this "treasure" we should make sure not to lose this wealth of knowledge, indeed we should enrich it through research in the memory of the elderly and compare ourselves with the other cultures of the Incult project, which certainly have similar knowledge.

-Mr. Veltri, how do you intend to conclude our chat?

-I have the honor to quote a phrase that I had the pleasure of finding in a book on medicinal plants dating back to 1922, the author of which was awarded a gold medal by the then Minister for Agriculture and Forests.

"Herbs not words all instill health"