

4.5 = NATIVE TAXA OF SICILIAN FLORA UTILIZED AS VEGETABLES

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In the last forty years the eating habits of Sicilian people, like those of the populations living in the Western countries, have greatly changed. Young people prefer new food flavors created by industries, while those of wild vegetables are almost unknown.

The elders and those who still have strong links with the country follow a Mediterranean-style diet instead. They know the seasons of wild vegetables and they are able to recognize and cook them according to established traditional methodologies.

People used to go almost daily to the countryside, margins of cultivated fields and woods, looking for wild vegetables.

This alimentary habit derived substantially from the situation of poverty in which the majority of the rural and urban population lived.

In order to preserve the important cultural patrimony linked to the employment of taxa of indigenous flora as food, some years ago a study of wild plants utilized traditionally as vegetables started in Sicily.

For this purpose, besides the consideration of the available literature (1, 2, 3, 4), numerous surveys have been carried out in different areas of the Island through interviews to shepherds, farmers, loggers, etc.; they led to the identification of edible taxa directly in the collection localities and indicated for each of them dialectal name, collection procedures and culinary preparations, as well as any popular beliefs.

All the acquired data were processed and some reports were drawn up, in which there are for each plant: the scientific name, synonyms, Italian names, Sicilian names, the main botanical characters, the properties and medicinal uses, the edible parts, the collection procedures, the traditional food uses, any merchantability, notes and curiosities, any warnings for the consumption.

The research showed that the wild species used as vegetables are about two hundred. These are mainly hemicryptophytes, therophytes and geophytes, belonging to 37 families; the most widespread ones turned out to be: Asteraceae with 31 genera and 80 infraspecific taxa; Brassicaceae with 16 genera and 28 taxa; Umbelliferae with 9 genera and 11 taxa; Fabaceae with 4 genera and 11 taxa; Alliaceae with 1 genera and 6 taxa; Valerianaceae with 3 genera and 4 taxa; Liliaceae with 3 genera and 4 taxa; Malvaceae with 2 genera and 4 taxa; Asparagaceae, Plantaginaceae and Urticaceae with 1 genus and 4 taxa; Boraginaceae with 3 genera and 3 taxa; Caryophyllaceae, Chenopodiaceae and Solanaceae with 2 genera and 3 taxa, etc.

It was also found that the aerial parts of wild vegetables are mainly collected, while the subterranean parts are less considered.

It sometimes happens that multiple parts of a plant are utilized; in particular the leaves (41.5%), the young shoots (37%), the basal rosette (31.5%), the flowers and inflorescences (10%), the bulbs (5%), the turions (3%).

Wild vegetables, rich in functional nutrients, still represent an important resource for the territories in which they grow since they can enrich the table of strong flavors, bitter or delicate, giving unique taste sensations: rustic, primitive, rough but genuine, able to join man and nature.

When skillfully collected by expert hands, they can become "healthy and genuine" ingredients for delicious local traditional and ancient recipes, fundamental for the revitalization or the reinforcement of quality food, strictly connected to the bio-territory.

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4) S. Arcidiacono, R. Costa, G. Marletta, P. Pavone, M. Napoli (2010) *Quad. Bot. Ambientale Appl.* 21:95-118