

Desert Plants

A quarterly journal devoted to broadening knowledge of plants indigenous or adaptable to arid and sub-arid regions, to studying the growth thereof and to encouraging an appreciation of these as valued components of the landscape.

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Editorial

Ethnobotany. How many times have we heard it said that we *are* what we *eat*? When Frank Cushing was adopted into the pueblo village of Zuñi in the nineteenth century, one prerequisite was that he eat Zuñi food long enough to have starved four times without it, at which point his flesh was considered "of the soil of Zuñi." The study of plants used by ethnic groups is called ethnobotany. Since ethnobotany inquires into **uses of plants** it is included in the broader field designated **economic botany**.

A traditional ethnobotanical study of a group of people includes an analysis of their agriculture as well as an inventory of the wild plants they utilize. What are the major crops? Are different varieties of a single crop intentionally kept separate? Before Columbus discovered America the Indians of southern Arizona had red corn, white corn, yellow corn, blue corn, crazy corn and laughing corn. They had flour corn that was soft enough when dry to be ground to cornmeal with stone mano and metate. They had flint corn that stored well because it was resistant to insects.

Aside from surveying crops, ethnobotany seeks to discover what other plants are used as food by ethnic groups. Are any of these on their way to becoming domesticated? Were any of the "wild" plants introduced intentionally or unintentionally by man? What plants are used for medicine? for clothing? for housing? for making baskets? for shade? for soil retention?

Man searches for better ways to utilize his environment and improve the quality of his life. Just as the plant kingdom is divided into species each with limited natural distribution around the world, so too is man divided into numerous ethnic groups. History shows us that a new discovery of a plant use, or new plant technology, or new

plant domestication, spreads within the ethnic group concerned because the people of the group are in communication and harmony one with the other. But the same factors which keep ethnic groups apart also tend to keep plant knowledge bottled up.

Today we find it hard to envision how Europeans lived without the common bean, the lima bean, corn, potatoes, tomatoes, bell peppers, chili peppers, pumpkins, squashes and other plants which had been domesticated by the American Indians. The taking of these plants to Europe by man and from there around the world was only the end of a very slow process of discovery, domestication and then spread from one ethnic group to another in the Americas. Although these were all New World crops of some antiquity, not all had yet spread to all of the indigenous ethnic groups of the Americas at the time Columbus discovered the New World. The cultivation of corn had not even spread from the Indians of Arizona to the nearby Paiute of Owens Valley, California even though these latter people had irrigation technology. Apparently it had already taken several millenia for the cultivation of corn to spread from Tehuacan, Mexico to Arizona.

Today in the world there are many plant uses known to various ethnic groups which if only known to other such groups could significantly enrich their lives. All people on earth belong to one ethnic group or another. Ethnobotany is of hybrid origin between plant science and anthropology. It seeks to communicate plant knowledge from each ethnic group to the outside world in an unbiased manner which contributes not only to plant science but which promotes a better understanding of the people themselves and thereby diminishes unwarranted prejudices and misconceptions.