

# PERICÓN

## *The Herb of the Clouds*

Edelmira Linares\*

Robert Bye\*\*

In September, the fields of the mountain slopes of central Mexico are carpeted with yellow flowers, and yellow flowered crosses protect the fields and houses of the southern part of the

Valley of Mexico and the nearby Neo-Volcanic Mountain Belt. In most cases, this anise-scented herb is *pericón* (*Tagetes lucida* Cav.)

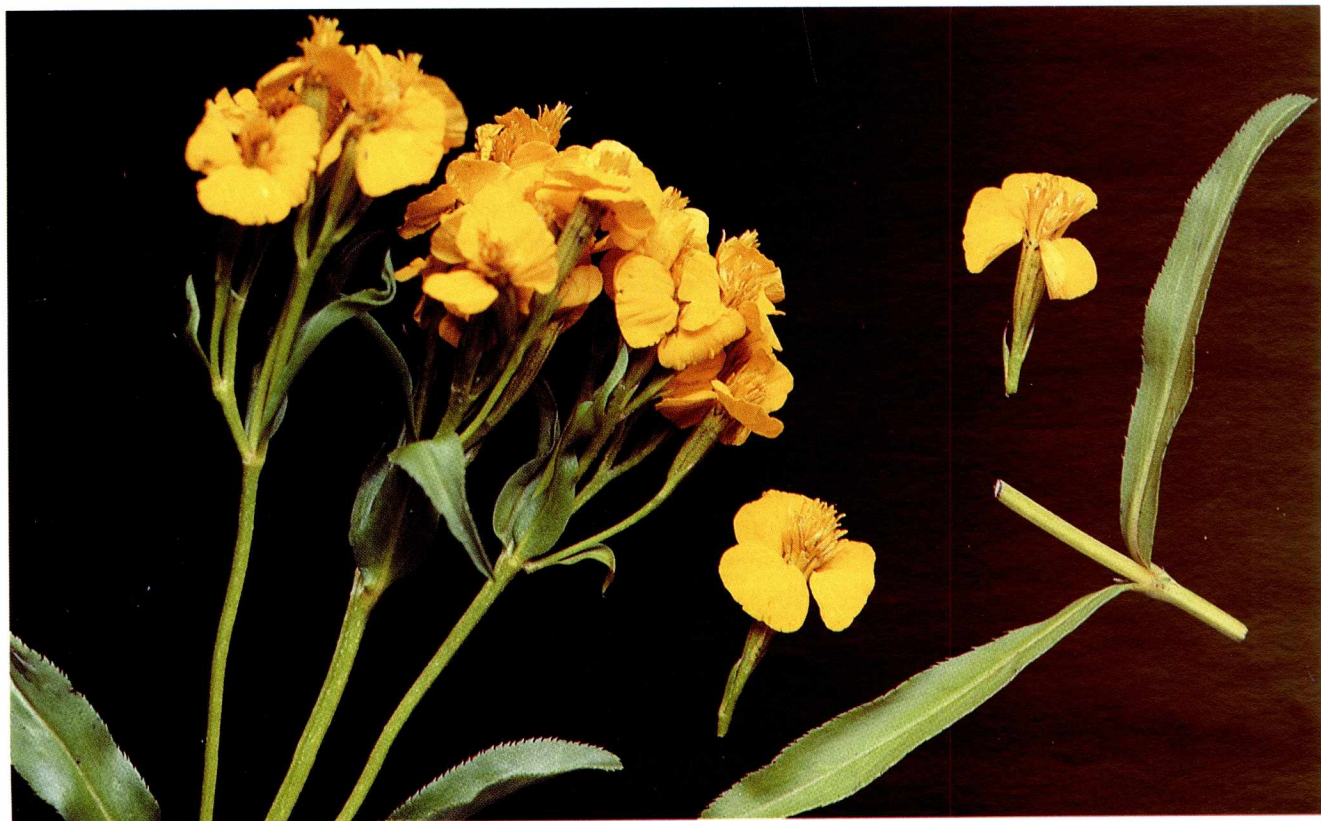
This Mexican medicinal plant belongs to the *Asteraceas* or daisy family and grows wild in Mexico's temperate climates. In central Mexico it is known as *pericón* and in the north, *yerbanis*. It is also called Santa María, *peri-*

*quillo*, *anicillo*, *curucumín* and *guía laga-zaa* (Martínez, 1969).

It has been used medicinally since pre-Hispanic times. In the Nahuatl language it is known as *yauhtli*, or herb of the clouds, because its flowers are usually densely clumped together and look somewhat like clouds, or because they uncloud people's eyes (Hernández, 1959).

\* Head of the Department of Education and Public Information of the Botanical Garden of UNAM's Institute of Biology.

\*\* Director of UNAM's Botanical Garden.



Photos by Edelmira Linares and Robert Bye

**Pericón.** Its flowers are usually densely clumped together and look like clouds. They also uncloud people's eyes.





Crosses of *pericón* are placed at the corners of the fields to protect them from the *chamuco* and hail. This field is in Tlalnepantla, state of Morelos.

Sixteenth century sources, such as the work of Francisco Hernández (1959) and Friar Bernardino de Sahagún (1979), report its use in treating a number of ailments: fighting the effects of cold; staving off fevers; facilitating urination; stimulating menstruation; curbing a cough; stopping gas; eliminating bad breath; increasing milk production; countering the effects of poison; alleviating headaches; and helping the demented and people frightened by lightning.

Martín de la Cruz and Bodiano (1964), on the other hand, mentions that it was used for the wounds caused by lightning and to protect people who cross water.

Today it is reportedly useful in the treatment of abdominal pain, cramps

and flatulence, as well as to scent children's bath water. Occasionally, it is thrown onto flames instead of incense to scent rooms and fumigate and, particularly in hot climates, to get rid of scorpions.

It is also used as a condiment because of its anise-like fragrance. In the outlying, rural areas of Mexico City *chayotes* (or vegetable pears) and corn are commonly boiled with *pericón* to make them more easily digestible and flavorful. It is also used for hot baths, since it is considered a "very hot" plant (Linares *et al*, 1990).

Medicinal plant vendors never pack other plants together with *pericón*, because they say its heat burns and withers the other herbs.

Besides its great medicinal value, it plays an important role in rituals: in ancient times it was associated with the rain god Tlaloc because it sprouted with the first rains. Today it is gathered to be used in the festival of Saint Michael, the Archangel, September 29.

On the eve of Saint Michael's Day, September 28, people make crosses of *pericón* and hang them on their doors, windows and at the corner of fields to make sure the *chamuco* (devil) stays out. On that day, the previous year's cross is taken away and replaced by a new one, which will stay there until the following year. Saint Michael will now be able to come by with his sword on his feast day and kill the *chamuco*, barred from taking refuge in the houses and planted fields protected by the crosses. This belief is strongly rooted in the states of Morelos, Mexico and in some parts of the state of Puebla. ❧

### Bibliography

- De la Cruz, M. and J. Badiano, *Libellus de Medicinalibus Indorum Herbis*, Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social, Mexico City, 1964.
- Hernández, F., *Historia natural de la Nueva España*, UNAM, Mexico City, 1959.
- Linares, E., R. Bye and B. Flores, *Tés curativos de México*, Institute of Biology, UNAM, Mexico City, 1990, pp. 83-84.
- Martínez, M., *Las plantas medicinales de México*, Ediciones Botas, Mexico City, 1969.
- Sahagún, B. de, *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*, Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City, 1979.
- Simeón, R., *Diccionario de la lengua náhuatl o mexicana*, Siglo XXI, Mexico City, 1984, p. 164.