



Photos by Daniel Mungúa

Nenuphar.

The Ethnobotanical Garden And Museum of Traditional Medicine And Herbalism

Laura Parrilla Álvarez*

The ethnobotanical knowledge gleaned from popular use of plants continues to be entwined with Mexicans' daily life along with other practices and is recognized today as part of our cultural patrimony.

Morelos' Ethnobotanical Garden and Museum of Traditional Medicine and Herbalism is very special. The garden itself is a museum, structured with research areas, inventories, cataloging, service to the public, thematic interpretation and maintenance, among others. All of them fulfill both an educational and social

function by preserving a cultural system born and maintained without the need for written rules.

Here, living plants make up the permanent exhibit. What is being preserved and shown is precisely that intangible patrimony: the knowledge and use of traditional medicine, centrally in the state of Morelos.

The garden today boasts approximately 800 species divided into five collections: food and condiments, ornamental, orchids, xerophytes and medicinal plants. The medicinal plants make up the bulk of the garden's species. Ethnobotanical research has determined that the state of Morelos has between 500 and 950

* Director of the Ethnobotanical Garden and Museum of Traditional Medicine and Herbalism.



Nenuphar.

*Passiflora* or passion flower.*Moco de guajolote*, or turkey booger flower.

species of medicinal plants,¹ and to date, the garden's collection numbers about 500.

The collection's importance has been recognized by the Mexican Association of Botanical Gardens, and it is registered as a national collection of medicinal plants, given that it is a formalized collection, it is representative and it includes endangered species.²

The exhibition is organized according to both cultural use and genera (for example, if the plants are varieties of orchids, cacti, medicinal, condiments, etc.) to enrich the interpretation of the collection and at the same time facilitate plant care and conservation by providing the particular growing conditions they need. This might be an obstacle for the definition of a collection policy, which is why the brief description of each item includes its medicinal use. Therefore, even if the plants are grouped thematically or taxonomically, they clearly form part of the medicinal collection.

In addition to a living museum, we are essentially a botanical garden given over to the kinds of academic functions and commitments and research and dissemination activities common to this type of institution. The role of botanical gardens has been redefined due to the disappearance of plant species to contribute to the conservation of biodiversity and the sustainable use of plant resources, particu-

larly of the local flora where they are situated and the conservation of endangered plant species and populations.³

Botanical gardens have become specialized in the cultivation and propagation of plants and being educational centers that offer visitors first hand experiences in biodiversity. The World Strategy for the Conservation of Botanical Gardens puts the priorities for conservation on rare and endangered species, economically important species, those needed for restoring the stability of ecosystems, other important plant groups like food crops and their wild relatives and medicinal plants. This strategy, however, is always undertaken from the viewpoint of conserving germoplasm and the genetic wealth and variety, but not from that of the plants' cultural value.

Therefore, in conservationist terms, botanical gardens are considered the last resort for a few plants: refrigerated spaces for genes and seeds that await better days to germinate in laboratories. This is like saying we can film the last dance, the last prayer, the last fiesta of a people and keep the record of it to inventory the loss and weep over our misfortune. In my opinion, the educational potential of botanical gardens is more important than their conservationist potential because they offer us the possibility of making the public aware of the vast



Museum of Traditional Medicine.



Traditional remedies are widely used in Mexico.

cultural and genetic wealth we possess, in addition to fostering respect for the cultural diversity manifested in the use and appropriation of the plants.

The Mexican Association of Botanical Gardens considers the Morelos garden fully consolidated. However, for the last 20 years the garden's administration has struggled to keep it active and to fulfill its objective of conserving both a cultural and phylogenetic patrimony. This has made for an enormous commitment and the very great possibility that we have not been able to develop its full potential given our restricted budget.

The place is four hectares in size: about one and a half hectares are taken up by the collections, another hectare and a half are given over to a park and the rest is used mainly for administrative purposes.

Maintaining the collection is quite complex given the wide varieties of species, their arrangement for exhibition and unfavorable soil conditions.

The reproduction area is vital because this is where the plants that will later be introduced into the exhibition to keep the collection complete are grown. This area reproduces plants that die when they have finished their natural life cycle, which is very difficult since about 40 percent of the species in the garden

have short life cycles and some are wild plants for which there is no experience in man-managed growth. Many of these plants vary substantially when subjected to human cultivation techniques.

The garden's collection includes historically important plant species such as those used by Mexico's pre-Hispanic inhabitants; information about them has been gleaned from codices and other historical sources. Among these plants are the *zoapatli*, different kinds of copal, *pericón*, scale ferns and *toloache*. The *toloache* is an interesting example of popular belief in the magical use of plants. It is said that an infusion of the plant drunk by the person one loves without luck will make this person love you back, but actually the *toloache* is extremely poisonous so its exhibit requires surveillance and clear signs warning the public.

Other plants with widespread, important cultural uses are endangered by over-use. Among these are the *linaloe*, the *cuachalalate*, the *copalchi* and the yellow *quina*.

The small but novel Museum of Traditional Medicine and Herbalism situates its subject matter as an alternative in terms of cultural models, offering a concise overview of the relationship between Mexico's population and medicinal flora. Recently restructured, the museum won a national prize in 1999. Located next to the gar-



The Baby Jesus of Health.



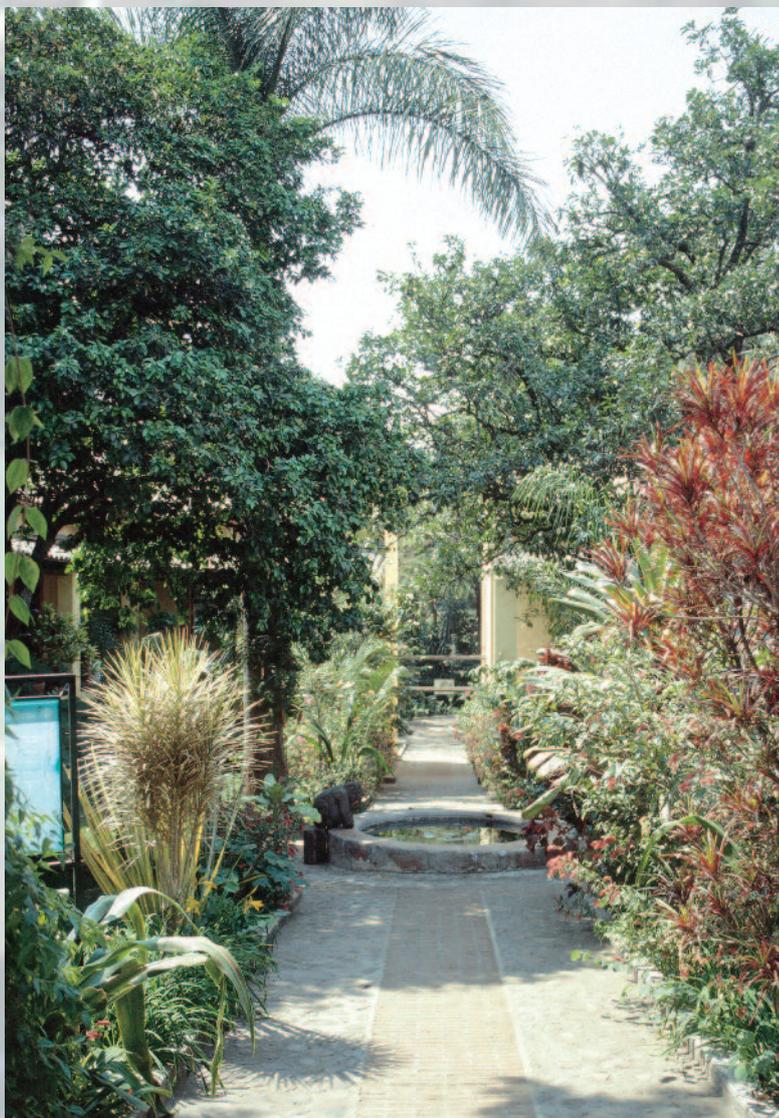
Substances used for remedies.



Lantana in the Ethnobotanical Garden.



Cotton flowers.



Walkway in the museum.

den, it has five small rooms dedicated mainly to explore the relation between beliefs and emotions and health care practices, a phenomenon little studied by medicine. For example, they take a look at the healing powers attributed to patron saints like the *Niño de la salud* (Baby Jesus of Health), whose traditional attire was changed after the 1985 earthquakes in Mexico and is now dressed like a doctor because it is believed that the souls of the doctors killed then are now helping him in his tasks.

There is also a room with interesting descriptions of popular ailments, along with their symptoms and remedies, including things like “the loss of one’s soul” or the “loss of one’s shadow,” which happens during sleep. Another is the *ojo*, or “evil eye”, which affects children mainly and is caused by the wrong person touching their heads (mothers can avoid this by pinning a red ribbon or a charm called “*ojo de venado*” on the baby’s clothes). The *susto*, produces lack of sleep and tension in a person who has suffered a shock or experienced a strong emotion.

Another room displays the most commonly used seeds and herbs, altars with all the essences needed in rituals to expel bad spirits or beings who are causing the person to suffer.

What is interesting about this museum is how the combination of ritual, common knowledge and traditional practices is believed to be more effective than medicine to prevent and solve health problems. And sometimes it actually is. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Information from biologist Margarita Avilés.

² Edelmira Linares, “Los jardines botánicos en México y su potencial para albergar las colecciones nacionales,” *Amaranto* 19 (3) (Mexico City: Asociación Mexicana de Jardines Botánicos, 1992), pp. 17-26.

³ Vernon H. Heywood, “Los jardines botánicos y la conservación de la biodiversidad,” *Amaranto* 10 (3) (Mexico City: Asociación Mexicana de Jardines Botánicos, 1998), pp. 10-16.