Notes RBG Edinb. 41(3):472 (1984)

BOOK REVIEW

Plants and Medicine in North Africa. This volume* is the third in a series devoted to the medicinal plants of the world and an indication of the widespread resurgence of interest in folk medicine and ethnobotany. Its author, Loutfy Boulos of Cairo, acquired his wide-ranging information during numerous plant-collecting trips in many parts of northern Africa, scouring the suks for samples, and talking to the drug sellers. About 370 species of flowering plants are dealt with alphabetically by family and genus. This might seem a surprisingly large number relative to the total of species in the region (probably under 3000); however, it is easy for Europeans to forget that in this harsh environment a high proportion of non-urban people have long been traditionally dependent on their native plants as drugs or panaceas for themselves and their animals.

In the enumeration of the species there are given distributional data, local names (in Arabic and Berber—transliterated—French and English) and the medicinal uses to which the plants are put. Sources of information (e.g. the Rabat drug market) and published references are clearly indicated. Indeed, the presentation of all the information—and there is a lot of it—is very simple and lucid. The main text is supplemented by a glossary of medical terms, a full bibliography, a medicinal index to ills or deficiencies and the corresponding curative plants. It is interesting to note that in the latter index the highest number of plant entries comes under Diuretics followed, well behind, by Stimulants and Aphrodisiacs. This index also leads one to the remarkable entry under *Hyoscyamus faleslez* of 'used as a war poison in the Sahara as well as for criminal purposes [not elaborated upon], hallucinogenic . . .; seeds used by women to gain weight'.

Over 100 species are excellently illustrated by the full-page line drawings of Magdy El-Gohary. These are generally interspersed among the text close to, or opposite, the relevant plant entry, but inevitably some are quite widely separated and it is surprising that in such a tidy, well-organised book there is no cross reference to them.

Inevitably, it is easy to be cynical about the real medicinal value of such a large number of species and the manifold properties of individual ones. The sophisticated westerner might well regard much of this catalogue as a modern, mildly amusing equivalent of a mediaeval European herbal. For all that, this is a compendium which brings together a great mass of previously widely dispersed folklore and folk medicine. It is a valuable information source for ethnobotanists and for plant chemists or pharmacists searching for new drugs in this part of the Arab world.

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* Boulos, Loutfy. *Medicinal plants of North Africa.* 286 pp. with 103 full-page figs. 1983. Reference Publications, Inc. Michigan. $39.95.