

Hello old friend- *Plantago ovata*

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(SS) Specimen spotlight, Lecture Theatre 5, Appleton Tower, 11 Crichton Street, EH8 9LE, June 7, 2022, 4:00 PM - 5:30 PM

I never thought I would see a herbarium specimen of a plant I researched during my Masters in India, before moving to the other side of the world. The husk of the plant was a necessary staple in our kitchen when I was growing up in Punjab and it has fascinated me since childhood. So, when I saw this plant as part of the herbarium collection at Wisley, it leapt out at me as the perfect specimen to present for the SPNHC Conference.

Plantago ovata is a soft, stemless, hairy annual herb in the Plantaginaceae that is native to Asia, the Mediterranean region and North Africa. Isabgol, also known as Psyllium husk, is derived from the seeds of this plant. The name has its roots in the Sanskrit words “asp” and “ghol,” which together mean "horse flower" alluding to the shape of its seed. The plant grows to a height of 30–45 cm with long and narrow leaves and contains around 70% soluble fibre and 30% insoluble fibre. In India, it is known as a common remedy for effective weight loss and clearing out the toxins from the digestive tract. Isabgol has a myriad of health benefits including lowering plasma cholesterol levels in humans because of its hygroscopic properties. The whole grain of *Plantago* compares favourably in quality with cereals & legumes. The seed and husk of this plant are used in medicine as demulcent and highly valued for treating constipation & dysentery. A widely used drug in the US called ‘metamucil’ is isabgol husk combined with dextrose and mineral salts. In addition to its medicinal value, it is also used in dyeing, calico printing, setting lotions and in the food industry for manufacturing ice creams and sauces.

A.J Huxley collected this particular specimen in Syria in April 1964. Huxley was a famous botanist and author, vice president of the RHS, and son of the very well-known evolutionary biologist, Julian Huxley. The speaker cannot take any responsibility for any adverse effects from the use of plants. Always seek advice from a professional before using a plant medicinally.

