

Chapter 9

Unlocking Nature's Pharmacy: Anticancer Potential of Medicinal Plants from India

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Abstract: Cancer remains a major global health challenge and one of the leading causes of mortality worldwide. The limitations of conventional therapies such as chemotherapy and radiation, including high toxicity, drug resistance, and adverse effects, have increased interest in alternative and complementary treatment approaches, particularly those derived from natural sources. India, with its rich biodiversity and long-standing tradition of healing systems such as Ayurveda, offers a vast reservoir of medicinal plants with significant anticancer potential. This chapter presents a comprehensive overview of selected Indian medicinal plants that have shown promising anticancer activity in both traditional usage and modern pharmacological research. The therapeutic effects of these plants are largely attributed to a wide variety of bioactive phytochemicals, including alkaloids, flavonoids, terpenoids, and phenolic compounds. These compounds exert anticancer effects through multiple mechanisms such as inducing apoptosis, inhibiting cell proliferation, suppressing

angiogenesis, modulating immune responses, and enhancing antioxidant defenses. Key medicinal plants discussed include *Withania somnifera* (Ashwagandha), *Tinospora cordifolia* (Guduchi), and *Curcuma longa* (Turmeric), with a focus on their traditional uses and scientific validation. By connecting traditional knowledge with current biomedical research, this chapter highlights the role of Indian medicinal plants in cancer prevention and treatment. It also emphasizes their potential as sources for the development of safer and more effective anticancer agents, contributing to the progress of integrative oncology and future drug discovery. This chapter primarily draws upon existing literature to summarize widely used anticancer plants in India.

Keywords: Anticancer medicinal plants, anti-tumour, Ayurveda, bioactive compounds, Indian ethnomedicine

Introduction

India's rich and diverse flora has long served as a valuable source of medicinal plants, many of which possess significant anticancer properties. Rooted in the ancient traditions of Ayurveda and various indigenous healing systems, these plants have been used for centuries in traditional medicine. Today, modern scientific research is increasingly validating their therapeutic potential. Spanning from the Himalayan foothills to the tropical rainforests of the Western Ghats, India's varied ecosystems are home to a wide range of plant species, several of which have demonstrated promising anticancer activity. Cancer is one of the leading causes of death worldwide. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), cancer is responsible for millions of deaths globally each year. The disease can affect anyone, regardless of age, gender, or geographical location (<https://www.who.int/>). The exploration of anticancer medicinal plants in India is a multidisciplinary field that combines traditional knowledge with modern scientific research. Researchers are investigating the bioactive compounds present in these plants, their mechanisms of action, and their potential

applications in cancer treatment (Srinivasan, 2018; Singh et al., 2021). This research has the potential to lead to the development of novel anticancer therapies that are effective, safe, and accessible. Many Indian medicinal plants have been studied for their anticancer properties, including *Withania somnifera*, *Tinospora cordifolia*, *Ocimum sanctum*, *Azadirachta indica*, and *Curcuma longa* (Sirsat et al., 2019; Morris et al., 2023). These plants have shown promising potential in targeting a variety of cancer types, including breast, lung, colon, and prostate cancers. The bioactive compounds they contain have been found to inhibit the growth of cancer cells, induce apoptosis (programmed cell death), and suppress tumor progression. Using medicinal plants in cancer treatment offers several benefits, such as lower toxicity and fewer side effects compared to conventional chemotherapy. Moreover, many of these plants are widely available and affordable, making them more accessible to a broader population (Greenwell and Rahman, 2015). However, further research is needed to fully harness the anticancer potential of these plants and to ensure their safe and effective use. The Indian government has recognized the potential of medicinal plants in healthcare and has initiated several programs to promote their cultivation, conservation, and utilization. The National Medicinal Plants Board, for example, works to promote the development of the medicinal plant sector, including research, cultivation, and trade (<https://nmpb.nic.in>). In conclusion, India's anticancer medicinal plants offer a promising avenue for cancer treatment and research. By combining traditional knowledge with modern scientific research, we can unlock the potential of these plants and develop novel therapies that can improve the lives of cancer patients. The future of cancer treatment in India may well lie in the country's rich botanical heritage, and further research is needed to explore the vast

potential of these medicinal plants. Through traditional and indigenous knowledge, we can develop new, effective, and sustainable treatments for cancer that are tailored to the needs of the Indian population.

Methodology

Through field and literature surveys, it was concluded that the plant possesses a wide array of ethnomedicinal uses. Additionally, the literature survey revealed its significant pharmacological values. Data were gathered from various databases including Scopus, Web of Science, Springer, PubMed, Google Scholar, MDPI, Science Direct, SciFinder, Scirus, and the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO). The search terms used included “plants used for anticancer activity,” “phytochemistry,” “pharmacology,” “active compounds,” and “other uses.” The literature reviewed spans the period from 2022 to 2025 (Jena et al., 2025; Kumar, 2025).

Results and discussion

The compilation of bioactive compounds from various plant species highlights the vast potential of natural products in cancer treatment. Table 1 lists 48 plant species along with their active compounds (Figure 1). These plants, belonging to diverse families, exhibit a range of anticancer properties attributed to different classes of compounds, including flavonoids, terpenes, alkaloids, and phenolic compounds. For example, curcumin from *Curcuma longa*, vincristine and vinblastine from *Catharanthus roseus*, and paclitaxel from *Taxus chinensis* are well-established potent anticancer agents. The mechanisms of action of these compounds are varied and include antioxidant activity, inhibition of cancer cell growth, induction of apoptosis, and disruption of signaling pathways

involved in cancer progression. Compounds such as epigallocatechin from *Camellia sinensis* and quercetin from various plants have shown promise in inhibiting cancer cell proliferation and promoting apoptosis. The diversity of bioactive compounds and their mechanisms underscore the significant potential for discovering new candidates for cancer therapy. Continued research is essential to fully explore their therapeutic value, improve their efficacy, and assess their safety profiles. By integrating traditional knowledge with modern scientific methodologies, the development of innovative anticancer treatments can be accelerated, offering promising new options for enhanced patient care.

Table 1: Some anticancer medicinal plants with their active compounds from India

Botanical name	Common name	Active compound (s)	Family	Sources
<i>Aegle marmelos</i> (L.) Corrêa	Golden apple	Lupeol (triterpene)	Rutaceae	Sirsat et al., (2019); Chandra et al., (2023)
<i>Allium sativum</i> L.	Garlic	Allicin, diallyl disulfide, S-allylmercapto-L-cysteine and S-allylcysteine	Amaryllidaceae	Umadevi et al., (2013); Nouroz et al., (2015); Keshav et al., (2025)
<i>Andrographis paniculata</i> (Burm.f.) Wall. ex Nees	Green chiretta	Andrographolide	Acanthaceae	Desai et al., (2008); Sirsat et al., (2019)
<i>Azadirachta indica</i> A.Juss.	Neem	Azadirachtin A, nimbin, nimbolide, gedunin	Meliaceae	Keshav et al., (2025)
<i>Bauhinia variegata</i> L.	Mountain ebony	Lupeol, kaempferol, quercetin, quercitrin, kaempferol-3-	Fabaceae	Singh et al., (2021); Sharma et al.,

		glucoside		(2021)
<i>Berberis vulgaris</i> L.	Common barberry	Berberine	Berberidaceae	Khushali et al., (2020)
<i>Betula pubescens</i> Ehrh.	Downy birch	Betulinic acid	Betulaceae	Halder et al., (2024); Srinivasan, (2018)
<i>Boerhavia diffusa</i> L.	Punarnava	Boeravinones	Nyctaginaceae	Keshav et al., (2025)
<i>Boswellia serrata</i> Roxb.	Indian frankincense	Boswellic acids	Burseraceae	Srinivasan, (2018); Khushali et al., (2020); Trivedi et al., (2023)
<i>Butea monosperma</i> (Lam.) Kuntze	Flame-of-the-forest	Isocoreopsin, butrin and isobutrin	Fabaceae	Subramaniyan et al., (2016); Singh et al., (2021); Ajmire et al., (2021)
<i>Camellia sinensis</i> (L.) Kuntze	Tea plant	EGCG (Epigallocatechin)	Theaceae	Halder et al., (2024)
<i>Carica papaya</i> L.	Papaya	Papain, carpaine, isothiocyanate	Caricaceae	Morris et al., (2023)
<i>Catharanthus roseus</i> (L.) G.Don	Cape periwinkle	Vincristine, vinblastine	Apocynaceae	Umadevi et al., (2013); Keshav et al., (2025)
<i>Citrus × limon</i> (L.) Osbeck	Lemon	Citral and limonene	Rutaceae	Morris et al., (2023)
<i>Cullen corylifolium</i> (L.) Medik.	Scurfy pea	Flavonoids	Fabaceae	Khushali et al., (2020); Lee et al., (2024)
<i>Curcuma longa</i> L.	Turmeric	Curcumin	Zingiberaceae	Srinivasan, (2018);

				Keshav et al., (2025)
<i>Cyperus rotundus</i> L.	Nut grass	Sesquiterpenes, cyperotundone, caryophyllene oxide, α -Cyperone, α -Pinene	Cyperaceae	Khushali et al., (2020); Nidugala et al., (2023); Bezerra et al., (2025)
<i>Dregea volubilis</i> (L.f.) Benth. ex Hook.f.	Jukti	Taraxerone	Apocynaceae	Hossain et al., (2013)
<i>Elephantopus scaber</i> L.	Elephant foot	Deoxyelephantopin and isodeoxyelephantopin	Asteraceae	Khushali et al., (2020); Roy et al., (2015)
<i>Ferula narthex</i> Boiss.	Asa foetida	Asafoetida are α -pinene, α -terpineol,	Apiaceae	Khushali et al., (2020)
<i>Ficus racemosa</i> L.	Cluster fig	Galic acid, chlorogenic acid, syringic acid, catechin, epicatechin and rutin.	Moraceae	Khushali et al., (2020); Sivakumar et al., (2019)
<i>Glycine max</i> (L.) Merr.	Soybean	Genistein	Fabaceae	Sirsat et al., (2019); Halder et al., (2024)
<i>Glycyrrhiza glabra</i> L.	Liquorice	Glycyrrhizinic acid	Fabaceae	Halder et al., (2024)
<i>Hemidesmus indicus</i> (L.) R.Br.	Indian sarsaparilla	Rutin, withanolides, glycosides, flavonoids, tannins and sterols	Apocynaceae	Sai et al., (2024)
<i>Jatropha curcas</i> L.	Physic nut	Jatrophalactone, jatrophalone, jatrophadiketone, pyrogallol	Euphorbiaceae	Oskoueian et al., (2011); Liu et al., (2012); Saleh et al., (2023)
<i>Mimosa pudica</i> L.	Touch -me-not	Amino acid Mimosine.	Fabaceae	Parmar et al., (2015)

<i>Moringa oleifera</i> Lam.	Drumstick tree	Isothiocyanat, thiocarbamate	Moringaceae	Morris et al., (2023)
<i>Morus alba</i> L.	White mulberry	Quercetin	Moraceae	Halder et al., (2024)
<i>Nigella sativa</i> L.	Black caraway	Thymoquinone	Ranunculaceae	Halder et al., (2024)
<i>Ocimum tenuiflorum</i> L.	Holy basil	Eugenol, cirsilineol, isothymusin, apigenin	Lamiaceae	Morris et al., (2023)
<i>Persicaria acuminata</i> (Kunth) M.Gómez	Knotweeds	Resveratrol	Polygonaceae	Halder et al., (2024)
<i>Phyllanthus emblica</i> L.	Indian gooseberry	Ellagic acid, gallic acid, quercetin, emblicannins A and B	Euphorbiaceae	Sirsat et al., (2019)
<i>Podophyllum hexandrum</i> Royle	Ban kakri	Podophyllotoxin, podophyllotoxin 4-O-glucoside	Berberidaceae	Anand et al., (2022)
<i>Pulicaria wightiana</i> (DC.) C.B.Clarke	False fleabane	Flavonoids, terpenes, clerodane	Asteraceae	Khushali et al., (2020); Bhanu and Thyagaraju, (2017)
<i>Raphanus sativus</i> L.	Radish	Roscovitine	Brassicaceae	Greenwell and Rahman, (2015)
<i>Reseda luteola</i> L.	Dyer's rocket	Luteolin	Resedaceae	Halder et al., (2024)
<i>Rubia cordifolia</i> L.	Indian madder	Rubidianin, rubiadin, rosemary acids, purpurin, alizarin, xanthopurpurin	Rubiaceae	Sirsat et al., (2019)
<i>Senegalia catechu</i> (L.f.) P.J.H.Hurter & Mabb.	Black Cutch Tree	Polyphenolic and flavonoid compounds	Fabaceae	Khushali et al., (2020)
<i>Senna alexandrina</i> Mill.	Egyptian senna	Sennosides, which are anthraquinone glycosides	Fabaceae	Singh et al., (2021); Khatoon et al., (2025)

<i>Senna auriculata</i> (L.) Roxb.	Tanner's cassia	4-(4-chlorobenzyl)-2,3,4,5,6,7-hexahydro-7-(2-ethoxyphenyl) benzothiazine-8(1H)-one	Fabaceae	Esakkirajan et al., (2014); Singh et al., (2021)
<i>Tanacetum parthenium</i> (L.) Sch.Bip.	Feverfew	Parthenolide	Asteraceae	Halder et al., (2024)
<i>Taxus chinensis</i> (Pilg.) Rehder	Chinese yew	Paclitaxel (taxol)	Taxaceae	Halder et al., (2024)
<i>Tecomella undulata</i> (Sm.) Seem.	Roheda	Quercetin	Bignoniaceae	Khushali et al., (2020)
<i>Terminalia arjuna</i> (Roxb. ex DC.) Wight & Arn.	Arjuna	Arjunine, arjunetin, lactone, reducing/non reducing sugar, essential oil	Combretaceae	Singh et al., (2021); Singh et al., (2017)
<i>Tinospora cordifolia</i> (Willd.) Hook.f. & Thomson	Heart-leaved moonseed	Palmatine, magnoflorin, jatrorrhizine, tinocordiside	Menispermaceae	Morris et al., (2023)
<i>Trigonella foenum-graecum</i> L.	Methi	Diosgenin	Fabaceae	Raju et al., (2004)
<i>Withania somnifera</i> (L.) Dunal	Ashwagandha	Withaferin A, withanolides	Solanaceae	Srinivasan, (2018); Keshav et al., (2025)
<i>Ziziphus mauritiana</i> Lam.	Indian jujube	Betulinic acid, ursonic acid	Rhamnaceae	Khurshid et al., (2021); Khushali et al., (2020); Kumari et al., (2025)

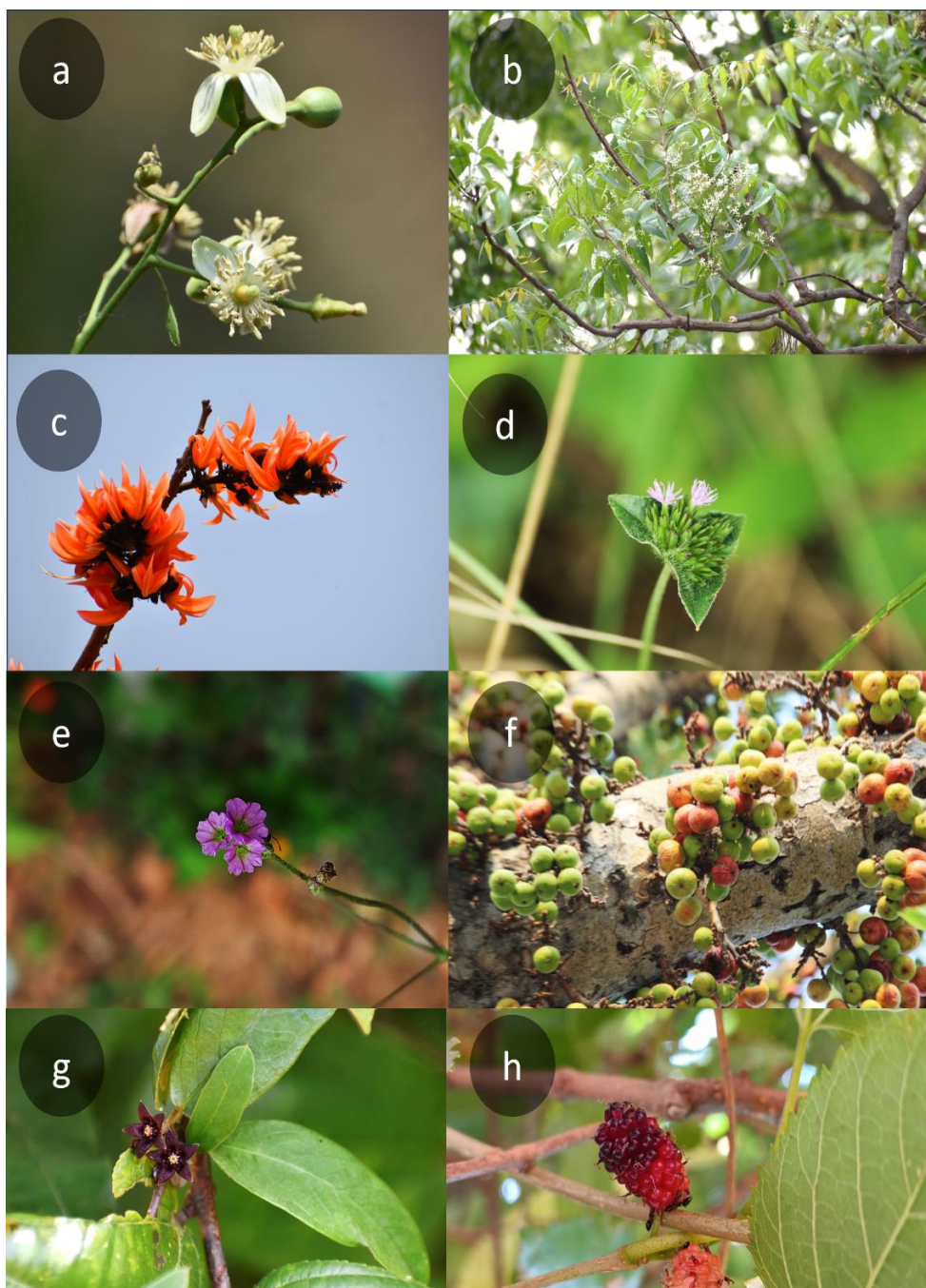


Figure 1: Some anticancer medicinal plants in India a) *Aegle marmelos*, b) *Azadirachta indica*, c) *Butea monosperma*, d) *Elephantopus scaber*, e) *Boerhavia diffusa*, f) *Ficus racemosa*, g) *Hemidesmus indicus*, h) *Morus alba*

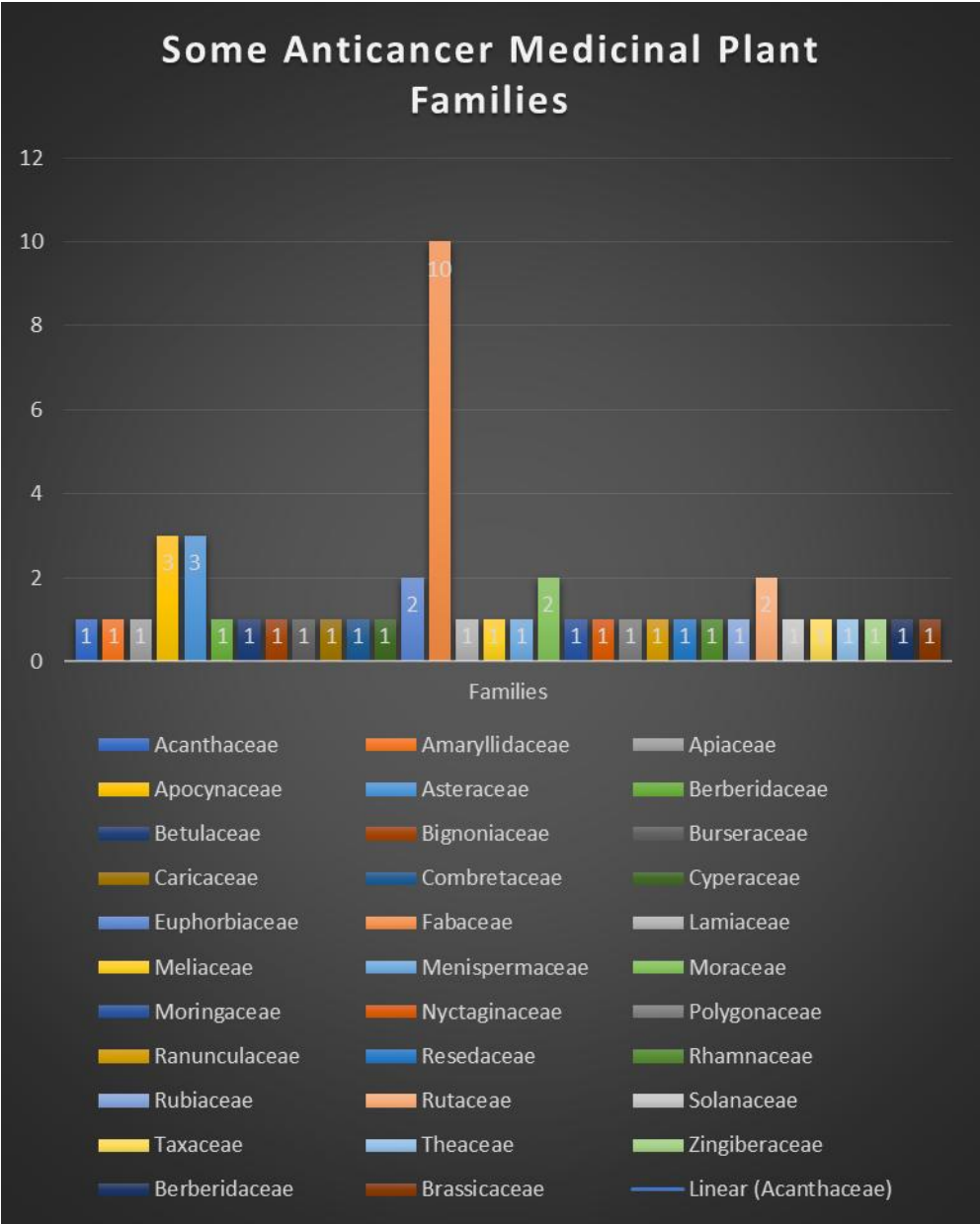


Figure 2: Graphically presented some anticancer medicinal plants families

According to Figure 2, it concluded that the list of various plant families the most dominant species are Fabaceae consist of 10 plant species, Asteraceae

and Apocynaceae consist of 3 species followed by Rutaceae, Apocynaceae, Moraceae, Euphorbiaceae, followed by rest of the families.

CONCLUSION

Cancer remains one of the most widespread and deadly diseases worldwide, posing significant challenges to global healthcare. Although conventional treatments such as chemotherapy, radiation, and targeted therapies have advanced, their limitations including severe side effects, variable efficacy, and drug resistance highlight the critical need for safer and more effective alternatives. India, with its rich biodiversity and longstanding traditions in herbal medicine, holds a vast and largely untapped reservoir of medicinal plants with promising anticancer potential. Ancient healing systems such as Ayurveda, Siddha, and Unani have long valued these plants, and modern scientific research increasingly supports their therapeutic efficacy through pharmacological and biochemical studies. This chapter has provided a comprehensive overview of select Indian medicinal plants, emphasizing their traditional applications, botanical characteristics, and bioactive compounds. By integrating ethnomedicinal knowledge with contemporary scientific evidence, it demonstrates the significant promise these plants hold for developing novel plant based anticancer therapies. Ultimately, bridging traditional wisdom with modern science not only deepens our understanding of these natural resources but also paves the way for innovative safe and sustainable cancer treatment strategies.

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