

LOVING AND LIVING WITH PLANTS
BY LAILA KARIM



The flower maryam comes with MYTHS AND BELIEFS!

Last month, while returning from the Prophet's Mosque at Madina after the morning prayer, I found this flower in the street side shops. Instantly I went down memory lane when sometime in the late 50s or early 60s someone was in labour pain and women around were looking for maryam – the flower that can bring the pain down and make the delivery safe for both mother and the child. As a young one I was not able to see the rest.

Days passed and I became a mother and the tale of maryam was forgotten. Seeing the flower again though, I wanted to understand and get closer to this mythical flora. I talked to the shopkeeper and asked about the flower.

"It is the belief that works" he said, "otherwise it is a flower of the desert." I bought several, but found no seeds. This year Hajj was eventful and there was no scope to enquire about further details on where I could get seeds.

From the passing window of the bus I saw the signboard of a nursery - somewhere on the left side of the highway towards the Jeddah Airport. But it was not the time to stop and see.

After returning home, I shared the flower with some of my near and dear ones. They were thrilled! I tried to find related information from different sources. But besides scattered information (except Wikipedia), I was disappointed; a real life image of the plant and its garden or the valley where it grows.

I learnt that besides Saudi Arabia, maryam (also called as mariym booti, Nabi booti, Madina leaves) is found and sold in Pakistan and Iran. I saw them in the market places, especially in the street side vendors' baskets wrapped in or open, being sold at a modest price - depending on the size and quality (from 5 to 10 Riyal per piece) in the holy cities of Makkah, Madina and Meena. It is believed that Maryam helps during

labour – delivering the baby! It is also said that the leaves are also used to strengthen the womb and good for conception. The leaves of this herbal plant are available in the market places near mount Uhud – in one part of the holy city of Madina. These look like dried curry leaves.

It is also said that the Prophet (SAW) gave these leaves to a lady who was finding it difficult to conceive. The flower is not only



specific to labour but also has uses for other illnesses and diseases. Incidentally maryam is not eaten; rather it is soaked in a bowl of warm water in the delivery room. Gradually the plant/flower ball opens up to a full shape. Labour continues, the mother gently perspires as the flower ball starts softening, opening and expanding into a woody flower.

Sometimes she is given a sip of the water to quicken the process. As the flower blos-

soms, so does her body and when the flower is in full shape - she is ready too to bring the child into this world!

Maryam with the scientific name 'Anastatica' is found in barren areas in the Middle East and the Sahara Desert, including parts of North Africa and regions of Iran, Egypt, Palestine, Israel, Iraq, Jordan and Pakistan. Although the rehydrated plant sometimes is described as putting out new



leaves, flowers, and fruits, instead, the seeds may sometimes germinate and sprout new plants while still seated in the fruit on the dead parent plant.

After the rainy season, the plant dries up after dropping the leaves and curling branches shapes up into a tight ball and hibernates and waits for the next rain. Within the ball, the fruits remain attached and closed, protecting the seeds. Seeds are very

hardy and can remain dormant for years.

With the rain drops, the ball uncurls and the plant wakes up from the sleeping state. It is hygroscopic (absorbing or attracting moisture from the air.); its branches immediately reconstitute in the presence of water. It is picked (leaves, woody parts, and seeds) in February to April from shallow gravel - desert soils.

As a medicinal preparation, it is reconstituted in water and taken internally for colds, as an emmenagogue (herbs generally meant to bring on period/ menstruation), for epilepsy, uterine hemorrhage, and to bring pain relief and support for childbirth.

In some places, it is made into a powder - mixed with olive oil and honey, and as a liquid from fresh leaves - is used as a treatment for conjunctivitis and other problems of the eye. It is also used medicinally in countries where it does not grow; in Malaysia, it is commonly used for childbirth, where many women purchase herbal preparations directly from the traditional midwives.

The flower contains a number of elements - calcium, magnesium, potassium, zinc, and iron; in particular, calcium and magnesium work together to coordinate and regulate smooth muscle contractions. The soaked water can be drunk. The plant can be stored and re-used many times over. The very name of this flower - maryam has religious significance. It is referred to as the "leaf of Maryam" (mother of Jesus), the "hand of Fatima" (daughter of the Prophet (SAW) as well as simply 'daughter of the Prophet (SAW) and "resurrection plant.' It is referred in the Bible in II Kings 19:34-36 and in Psalms 83:13, "make them like tumbleweed."

The use of traditional medicines and remedies are rooted through traditional knowledge and belief – like the flower maryam. The timing of it blossoms, when matches with the labour time – it works like a lucky charm.

Photo: Collected