

How wild flowers can help our survival

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By A. A. Quraishy

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In order to spread awareness, Indus for all programme under the aegis of the Worldwide Fund (WWF) for nature, has for the first time, issued an illustrated calendar, depicting twelve species of the wild flora. The project was supervised by Dr Suraiya Khatoon of Botany Department, the University of Karachi.

The species are: *cistanche tubulosa* (phatakwar), *barleria prionitis* (kala bansa), *fumaria indica* (shatra), *euphorbia caducifolia* (thuhar), *capparis deciduas* (karir), *acacia nilotic* (babul), *solanum nigrum* (mako), *oxytelma esculentum* (dhudhani), *barleria acanthaiodes* (kakoori booti), *nerium indicum* (kaner), *senna alexenderina* (senna-i-makki) and *citrullus colocynthis* (indrayan).

Eleven of these species have medicinal properties, and are used locally in villages to cure different ailments or by herbal physicians, Hakims and Vaidis. The only exception is *balaeria*, upon which scientific research is still awaited.

These floral species are not meant for decoration, but they keep soil intact and save it from wind erosion. They are an important part of our top soil flora, a part of the web of life which usually remains invisible to us, but nevertheless as the clock ticks on, as it has been doing so since millions of year, they have been flourishing to keep our earth green and floral.

The scientists of flora and environment realised fairly late that wild flowers are also vitally linked to our eco-system and the web of life (which include us). It came to light recently that every species on earth had some important role in our environment and survival, directly or indirectly. They could be wild bushes, grasses or trees that bloom in different seasons of the year, depending on the moisture in the environment, the rainfall, the temperature, the nutrition in the soil, much of which flows with rain water and reaches the wild flora which, in turn, nourishes the important link—insects of various size and habits—to pollinate them and to sustain the species.

If the top soil remains uncovered the wind of the wild can play havoc with the fertile and rich layer that is not thick: it ranges between six inches to a foot or two but retains micro minerals for providing food and shelter to a great variety of insects, small mammals, reptiles, centipedes, millipedes— all that form an important link with the eco-system. They live in under the top soil.

The urbanisation drive in various countries has removed the wild flora from their natural locations, thus degenerating the top strata of the earth. Recently, some twelve different species of wild shrubs, grasses and creepers around Karachi – in Gulshan, Defence, Malir, Sohrab Goth and Gadap - have been wiped off completely. Their prototype, it was discovered, did not exist around the perimeter of Karachi.

—The writer is an authority on flora and fauna and the founding director of Karachi Zoo.