

Flowers in high places

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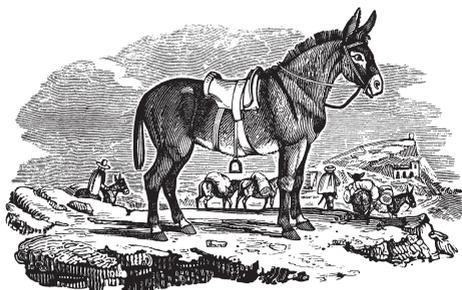
In a remote corner of the northernmost part of India is Ladakh, an area of cold desert in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. More than 85 per cent of the region lies above 5000 metres, a land of porous sandy soils, subject to temperatures varying from 40° to minus 40° and a cropping season of just five months. This is a harsh environment with very low rainfall and deep valleys with few rivers or streams. Oxygen levels are reduced due to the altitude and a relentless wind blows in all seasons. Not the sort of place to sustain any life easily, you would think - but you would be quite wrong.

Alpine plants thrive at the higher levels and many familiar flowers enjoy a short, colourful season. These plants are often grown for medicinal purposes, for preserving food in the winter months or even as a fuel once dried. Nothing is wasted.

Following the snow melt, fast growing crops are planted to provide food for humans and their animals and the small fields are shaded by very tall apricot trees. The fruits are preserved in jams or as juice and the kernels are made into a skin cream to alleviate the chapped skin caused by the scouring of the wind.

On a windswept June day in 2008, I eased myself rather stiffly out of the wooden saddle on the sturdy little pony I had been riding for several hours along a stony track on the mountainside. Our guide, the ponyman, beamed at my daughter and me as he led the ponies away for a well earned rest and to pitch his tent. We joined our host family in their home, precariously perched on a ledge above a deep valley, the lower floor being a barn for their animals. In the late afternoon sun, two fields appeared; a

vibrant emerald green, with their crops of barley, spinach, peas and potatoes blowing gently in the wind. In a patch of sun were blue *Geranium pratense* (an analgesic) alongside campanulas and gentians which were anchored firmly to the rough stone wall. Heavy with fruit were two



apricot trees and beneath these blue delphiniums (colic, insecticide) no more than 20cm in height, *Echinops* (septic wounds) and perhaps the most important, *Nepeta*, a cure for dysentery.



Our host family, a friendly, skilful couple with their grandmother and young son, were very hospitable. Although small in stature, they are immensely strong and their weatherbeaten faces bear the hallmark of life in the high desert. We shared their food of vegetables and chapatti made with the barley flour, momos (small dumplings filled with vegetables) and, of course, lots of chai - a very milky tea with an extra dollop of yak butter unless you were swift enough to decline the delicacy.

With the last rays of the sun setting behind the purple jagged mountain peaks, we watched as the family gathered in their goats, cows and yaks to the safety of the barn, as the snow leopard predate in this region. We could smell juniper and honeysuckle (asthma), the latter scrambling over the barn wall. In the morning our barley porridge and tea were served with dried apricots and little cakes with a subtle saffron taste, the crocuses being gathered from the valley below.

As we trekked for the next few days through high mountain passes, the variety of flowers growing in the most inhospitable places was a revelation. Potentilla (fever), wild rose (vitamin C and a treatment for hepatitis) saxifrage (liver tonic) verbascum (frost bite) and wild thyme (expectorant) all appeared along the route, growing in clumps between boulders, by a small stream or in the shelter of a wall. Succulents stretched alongside the icy streams and marmots chased one another through the small bright flowers. Stinging nettles too, dried for winter food, are equally useful.

So some of our well loved cottage garden plants have cousins performing a totally different role in their short colourful season. A vital medicine, a foodstuff or fuel and a decoration for the Buddhist monastery where flower petals are mixed with melted yak butter to make fragrant candles. The plants also provide brief spells of intense colour and aroma in the harsh landscape before the long cold months when man and beast hibernate until the sun melts the snow in April and once again the high speed, highly productive season starts again.

Jenny is membership secretary and treasurer of the Dorset CGS group. This wonderful piece wins this issue's £10 garden gift voucher - thank you Jenny!