



Ethnobotany of Northern Africa and Levante-Book Review

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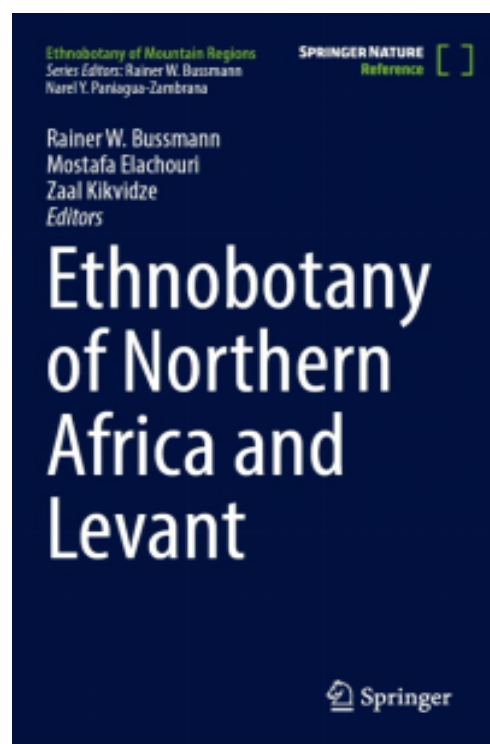
Book Review

Ethnobotany of Northern Africa and Levant Rainer W. Bussmann, Mostafa Elachouri, and Zaal Kikvidze (Eds). Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2024, pp xxxvii + 2157, €379.99 (Hardcover), €406.59 (eBook), ISBN 978-3-031-39794-3 (Hardcover), ISBN 978-3-031-43105-0 (eBook) <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-43105-0>

Can a single book truly capture centuries of plant knowledge, bridge different cultures, and inspire action for biodiversity preservation, all within two thousand pages? “**Ethnobotany of Northern Africa and Levante**” expertly curated by Rainer W. Bussmann, Mostafa Elachouri, and Zaal Kikvidze, not only attempts, but largely succeeds in this ambitious undertaking.

The book under review (*Ethnobotany of Northern Africa and Levante*) is a part of book series “*Ethnobotany of Mountain Regions*” (ETMORE, <https://link.springer.com/series/15885>).

With about 1500 illustrations and over 2000 pages, this book is a monumental contribution to the field of ethnobotany. It gives a wide and deep view of how people in Northern Africa and the Levant (the eastern Mediterranean) have used plants for medicine, food, rituals, and survival. The book is based on many years of research, fieldwork, and study of old records. You'll find a mix of country-by-country chapters, essays on special topics, and side-by-side comparisons. This extensive work brings together the expertise of 79 scholars from various regions, including Morocco (63), India (5), Georgia (2), Germany (2), Uzbekistan (2), Mauritania (2), and one each from Australia, Bhutan, and Pakistan. The Laboratory of Bioresources, Biotechnology, Ethnopharmacology and Health, Faculty of Sciences, University Mohamed Premier, Oujda, Morocco, accounts for the majority of contributions, emphasizing Morocco's leading role in advancing ethnobotanical research in the region.



The book is organized into three volumes, encompassing two major parts. Part I, titled *Ethnobotany of North Africa and Levant*, comprises 15 thematic chapters that provide regional overviews of the ethnobotanical traditions of countries such as Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Mauritania, and the Rif Mountain Range. Each regional chapter discusses the geography, ecology, culture, and economy of the respective area, followed by detailed sections on vegetation, medicinal plants, local uses, and traditional knowledge. Part II, titled *Plant Chapters*, includes an extensive compilation of 217 chapters focusing on individual plant taxa. In total, the book documents 607 plant species belonging to 226 genera and 78 families, providing a comprehensive account of the region's ethnobotanical diversity.

The editorial vision is clear and ambitious: to capture the ethnobotanical richness of Northern Africa and the Levant through country-specific chapters, thematic essays, and comparative analyses. The editors have designed the book thoughtfully. It is divided into chapters for different countries, along with thematic essays and comparative studies. The writing combines scientific accuracy with storytelling, making it both informative and engaging. The use of local languages such as Arabic, Berber, and Hebrew adds authenticity and respect to the cultural context. The contributors bring together knowledge from botany, anthropology, linguistics, and history. Each entry goes beyond plant description. It explores how plants are used in medicine, their role in traditions, and their place in people's daily lives. The book also discusses how migration, and climate change are affecting this traditional knowledge. Special attention is given to the voices of local and minority groups like the *Amazigh* and *Druze* communities.

The book is full of useful illustrations including ethnographic photographs, maps, drawings, herbarium scans, landscape imagery, and market scenes. The book often describes exactly how plants are prepared, named, or used in recipes and healing, and it connects older traditions with science. The emphasis is primarily on the traditional medicinal applications of plants, complemented by discussions of their roles in food, handicrafts, and ritual practices. For instance, the *Allium* genus receives attention not only for its taxonomy, but also for detailed preparation methods, local dietary traditions, and biomedical relevance. Each entry is heavily referenced, tracing knowledge through decades and across nations, and linking traditional and modern knowledge. The authors maintain taxonomic accuracy throughout.

As far as the audience of this book is concerned, book clearly targets researchers, ethnobotanists, pharmacologists, and advanced students. It is a valuable resource for scholars, teachers, and conservationists who care about preserving cultural and biological knowledge. It uses technical language and detailed scientific terms. Policy-makers and practitioners in health or conservation sectors may find it somewhat overwhelming, but targeted chapters (e.g., plant toxicity, dietary uses) are accessible for applied research.

Even though the book is excellent, there are a few areas that could be improved:

- **Editorial Consistency:** Some chapters lack uniformity in section headings, with certain species entries providing ecological data while others omit it, e.g., *Atractylis serratuloides* in Algeria lacks preparation methods clearly outlined in neighboring sections.
- **Regional Imbalances:** North African regions are generally well-represented, but chapters on Palestinian, Jordanian, and Syrian ethnobotany are comparatively sparser.
- **Integration of Modern Pharmacology:** While toxicity and biomedical activities are referenced, synthesis with contemporary clinical trials could be improved. Some chapters mention plant toxicity and healing uses, but they do not always connect this information to modern medical research. For example, the testing of *Allium* species (on mice and rabbits) is based on traditional knowledge but lacks modern clinical explanation.

For future editions, the following improvements could make the book even better:

- Use a standard format for all species entries (e.g., habitat/ecology, preparation/use, pharmacology, illustration).
- Connect traditional findings with modern research wherever possible. Where acute toxicity or clinical value is reported (e.g., *Allium ampeloprasum*, *Artemisia* species), authors could connect these findings to contemporary research for clearer translational potential.
- Improve image quality and consistency across chapters. Use of high-resolution photographs and annotated illustrations, as in the *Atriplex* and *Atractylis* sections, would facilitate botanical identification and practical use.
- Include fieldwork details such as dates, places, and informant information.
- Add QR codes for short videos or audio recordings to preserve oral traditions.
- Expand coverage of the Levant, especially Jordan and Syria. It could address regional imbalance.
- Involve local universities and organizations for co-authorship and validation.

Overall, *Ethnobotany of Northern Africa and Levante* is not only a valuable academic work but also a timely one. As traditional plant knowledge is disappearing quickly, this book helps preserve it for future generations. It supports global efforts in cultural preservation, herbal medicine, indigenous rights, and sustainable plant use.

This book offers deep insights into how plants are used in traditional ways and how they shape human culture. It reminds us that plants are more than natural resources. They are part of our history, health, and identity. The book is clearly written, visually rich, and regionally focused, making it useful for both research and teaching.

Like the other books I have reviewed earlier from the *Ethnobotany of Mountain Regions* series such as *Ethnobotany of the Andes*, *Ethnobotany of the Himalayas*, and *Ethnobotany of the Caucasus* (Malik 2020, 2021, 2022a, b, c), this volume also maintains high academic standards while highlighting the unique cultures of North Africa and the Levant. Together, these books offer a global view of traditional plant knowledge and cultural diversity.

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