



LAUREL

(*Laurus nobilis*)



Global
Facilitation
Unit
for Underutilized
Species

enabling deployment of underutilized species



What is Laurel and where does it come from?

Laurel is an extremely resilient evergreen forest tree of the Laureaceae family which grows in all Mediterranean areas. In Syria laurel grows wild above 200 meters over sea level along the coastal area. It is resistant to extreme temperatures and to coastal conditions. Its fruits are very dark small and round berries which ripen between October and December.

PROPERTIES

In Syria, laurel has been used for centuries in traditional cosmetic products such as laurel oil and laurel soap. Age-old methods handed down from generation-to-generation are used to produce unique products that are then sold in local markets. Although the local demand has remained stable for decades, export demand has grown recently, creating new income-generating opportunities for the local population.

In addition, dried laurel leaves are an important ingredient in Syrian and Mediterranean cooking. The leaves are also used in traditional medicine; dried leaves are brewed as an herbal tea and are used for medicinal purposes.

❖ Health

The dried leaves of Laurel are brewed and used to treat rheumatism, joint pains, schizophrenia, stress, to stimulate the appetite and as a sedative. The oil extracted from the berries is used as a cure for irritated skin, earache, asthma and urinary ailments.

❖ Cosmetic uses

The berries yield an essential oil used both for medicinal and cosmetic purposes. The main product made from laurel oil is laurel soap. Known for its unique perfume, it nourishes, softens, refreshes, and cleanses skin while acting as an antiseptic. It is especially recommended for sensitive and damaged skin. The oil is also used extensively in cosmetics and moisturizing products.

GROWING

The cultivation and collection of Syrian laurel berries is not well managed. As a result, the potential supply of laurel oil is not being fully exploited. Because of this, about 80% of the laurel oil used in the Syrian soap-making process is still imported from Turkey.



Contribution to social and economic development

In Syria, for generations, the livelihoods of the community members in two coastal and mountain areas, and of the traders in major Syrian cities have depended heavily on the production and marketing of traditional laurel products. Traditional collection and processing of wild laurel leaves and berries accounts for about one third of their total yearly income. The market chain is made up of collectors, traders, soap producers and consumers. The collectors dry leaves and/or process the berries into oil; the traders buy the oil from the collector/processor and sell it to the soap makers who then produce traditional soap for the local market and for export.

Through the sustainable utilization of laurel trees and the application of indigenous knowledge and sustainable market access, two goals can be reached: to improve the livelihoods of rural and forestry communities and conserve their traditions; to conserve genetic resources of the laurel tree and the surrounding landscape.

Leaves collection and trade

Laurel leaves are collected from wild trees and sun-dried then sold to traders and/or consumers in the local markets. If the leaves are sold to traders, the traders then re-sell the laurel leaves to herbal shops in the local markets or to foreign traders. The leaves are sold loose without any packaging.

LAUREL

Oil extraction and trade

Very few collectors harvest both leaves and berries. In Syrian mountain communities villagers collect laurel berries and manually extract the oil using traditional, multi-staged methods. The whole berries are boiled in water for six to eight hours in a metal container over a wood fire. As the oil rises to the surface, it is skimmed off with a wooden spoon then filtered and bottled. Sixteen kilograms of laurel berries produce about one litre of laurel oil. The quality of laurel oil depends on the fatty acid content which varies according to the variety of laurel used. Each variety is, in fact, characterized by the type of berry which differs in scent, size and colour. This labour-intensive process is primarily done by women and children in their home gardens. The extracted oil is sold to local soap makers, and herbal traders who then re-sell the oil at the city markets in Aleppo and Damascus. The price is fixed by the market, but can be subject to the oligopoly.

Soap processing and trade

Laurel soap is believed to have been developed in Syria some 2,000 years ago. There are about 50 privately owned small-scale soap factories that use traditional soap-making methods. Most of the factories are located in the Aleppo Province. The soap is made with laurel oil, olive oil, and caustic soda using a process called saponification. The oil mixture is blended with an aqueous solution containing the soda in large cauldrons. This mixture is then heated to over 200 C° and stirred until the oil is reduced to glycerine and sodium salts. The caustic soda solution is drained from the cauldron and the soap mixture is left overnight to cool slightly; the excess water is then drained off. Once a solid block has formed, the soap is cut manually into square bars, stamped and stored in a dry place for at least six months. The process of making soap is carried out from November to April. From May to November, soap storage and trading activities are carried out.

The soap is primarily sold to local consumers or to herbal shops. A small quantity is sold to foreign traders. Recently, some soap producers in Aleppo and Kessab modified the soap in an effort to capture new markets. These new products have become popular with hotels, tourists, and foreign traders.



The exhibits on show are just few of many commercial products made from laurel:

Traditional Syrian laurel soap

SOME PRODUCERS / RETAILERS / DISTRIBUTORS

- ❖ Ugarit - www.ugarit-soap.com
- ❖ Syriagate - www.syriagate.com
- ❖ Kessab Herbs Group - www.kessabherbs.com
- ❖ Laurapel of Kessab - <http://laurapel.com/>
- ❖ Compagnie Générale de Cosmétique
<http://www.savon-alep.com/>

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