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The *Labiatae* plants used traditionally in Thessaloniki

Abstract

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Thessaloniki, one of the oldest cities in Europe, has been throughout its history a melting point of different cultures. The market of the city trades with a high number of herbs used traditionally since ancient times for culinary and/or therapeutical purposes. *Labiatae*, the most frequently recorded family, includes the highest number of plant taxa. The aim of the present study is to identify taxonomically the different *Labiatae* herbs and furthermore to record information for their: origin (Greek or imported, collected from the wild or cultivated), frequency of appearance, way of usage, and healing properties. Their vernacular names do not correspond to a single species but very often to a group of similarly-odoured taxa, such in the cases of “oregano” and “mountain tea”. Most of the *Labiatae* taxa are of Greek origin and collected from the wild. Among them are local or balkan endemics, such as *Origanum dictamnus* and the different species of *Sideritis*. Because of their essential oils, *Labiatae* are widely used in food flavouring and in folk medicine. The digestive, nervous and respiratory are the frequently mentioned diseases, recorded to be treated by the *Labiatae* plants.

Introduction

Thessaloniki is one of the oldest cities in Europe, founded by Cassander (the brother-in-law of Alexander the Great) in 315-316 BC. From the beginning and during its history the city has been an important commercial centre and a crossroad of different cultures. The herbal market of the city consists of street markets, traditional and modern shops. The traditional shops and the street markets include interesting information which derives mainly from the inherited knowledge of the herbal sellers. The aim of the present study is to identify taxonomically the different *Labiatae* plants sold in the market of Thessaloniki, and furthermore to record information for their origin (Greek or imported, collected from the wild or cultivated), frequency of appearance, way of usage, and healing properties.

Materials and methods

The information was collected only from the traditional shops and the street markets, excluding the modern shops. Plant samples were collected from the market and identified taxonomically using the standard floras: Davis (1965-1985), Strid (1986), Strid & Tan (1991, 1997), Tutin & al. (1968-1993), and monographs: Kokkini (1983). The information

Table 1. The *Labiatae* plants sold in the market of Thessaloniki and their occurrence (%) in the examined shops and street markets.

Greek & English vernacular name	Taxon	Occurrence in the market (%)
Ρίγανη - Oregano	<i>Origanum vulgare</i> L. subsp. <i>hirtum</i> (Link) Ietswaart <i>O. x intercedens</i> , <i>O. onites</i> L., <i>Thymus capitatus</i> (L.) Hoffmanns & Link., <i>Satureja thymbra</i> L.	100
Τσάι του βουνού - Tea of the mountain	<i>Sideritis scardica</i> Griseb., <i>S. raeseri</i> Boiss. & Heldr. subsp. <i>raeseri</i> , <i>S. euboica</i> Heldr., <i>S. syriaca</i> L. subsp. <i>syriaca</i> , <i>S. perfoliata</i> L. subsp. <i>perfoliata</i>	100
Μέντα - Mint	<i>Acinos suaveolens</i> (Sibth. & Sm.)	90
Ύσσωπος - Poly	<i>Teucrium polium</i> L.	90
Φασκόμηλο - Greek sage	<i>Salvia fruticosa</i> Miller	90
Δυόσμος - Spearmint	<i>Mentha spicata</i> L., <i>M. longifolia</i> L., <i>M. spicata x longifolia</i> (<i>M. x villosa-nervata</i> Huds.)	90
Ματζουράνα - Sweet marjoram	<i>Origanum majorana</i> L.	85
Κυπαρισσάκι - Micromeria	<i>Micromeria juliana</i> (L.) Benth. ex Reichenb.	80
Δίκταμο - Dittany of Crete	<i>Origanum dictamnus</i> L.	80
Μελισσόχορτο - Lemon balm	<i>Melissa officinalis</i> L. subsp. <i>officinalis</i>	80
Βασιλικός - Basil	<i>Ocimum basilicum</i> L.	80
Θυμάρι - Thyme	<i>Thymus capitatus</i> (L.) Hoffmanns & Link, <i>Thymus sibthorpii</i> Benth.	70
Δενδρολίβανο - Rosemary	<i>Rosmarinus officinalis</i> L.	70
Λεβάντα - Lavender	<i>Lavandula angustifolia</i> Miller subsp. <i>angustifolia</i>	65
Θρούμπι - Savory	<i>Satureja thymbra</i> L.	55
Κόκκινο τσάι - Red tea	<i>Origanum vulgare</i> L. subsp. <i>vulgare</i>	30
Χαμεδρύς - Wall Germander	<i>Teucrium chamaedrys</i> L.	10
Φλησκούνι - Pennyroyal	<i>Mentha pulegium</i> L.	10
Μαρρούβιο - Horehound	<i>Marrubium vulgare</i> L.	10

from the herbal sellers was collected by interviews. The essential oil content of the dried plant samples were estimated by hydrodistillation using a Clevenger apparatus and expressed in ml.100g⁻¹.

Results and discussion

A total number of 28 different taxa (species and subspecies) of *Labiatae* family are sold in the market of Thessaloniki. Their vernacular names do not correspond to a single species but often to a group of similarly-odoured taxa, like in the cases of “oregano” and “mountain tea”. The *Labiatae* plants sold in the market of Thessaloniki have not the same occurrence. Some of them are found in the total number of the examined shops and street-markets, whereas some other are rarely found (Table 1).

The majority of the *Labiatae* plants sold in the market of Thessaloniki are of Greek origin, few of them are both Greek and imported whereas there are not exclusively imported *Labiatae* plants in the market of the city (Fig. 1). A large number of the plants are collected from the wild and few are cultivated. The majority are both grown wild and cultivated (Fig. 2). Among the *Labiatae* plants there are local or balkan endemics, such as *Origanum dictamnus* and the different taxa of *Sideritis*.

The essential oils- the biologically active compounds of the family- give the *Labiatae* plants a various spectrum of uses. Some of them are used as spices, other as pottages and some as a combination of both. All *Labiatae* plants sold in the market of Thessaloniki are used as medicinal. In many cases the sharp odour of the plant, which means high content of essential oil (> 1%), is the main standard for making it preferable to the consumers and therefore much frequent in the market. Occasionally, the high occurrence of a plant in the market is not correlated to the essential oil content but relates to other factors, such as the therapeutical efficiency and the traditionally attributed healing properties (Fig. 3).

A large number of diseases are supposed to be treated by the *Labiatae* plants according

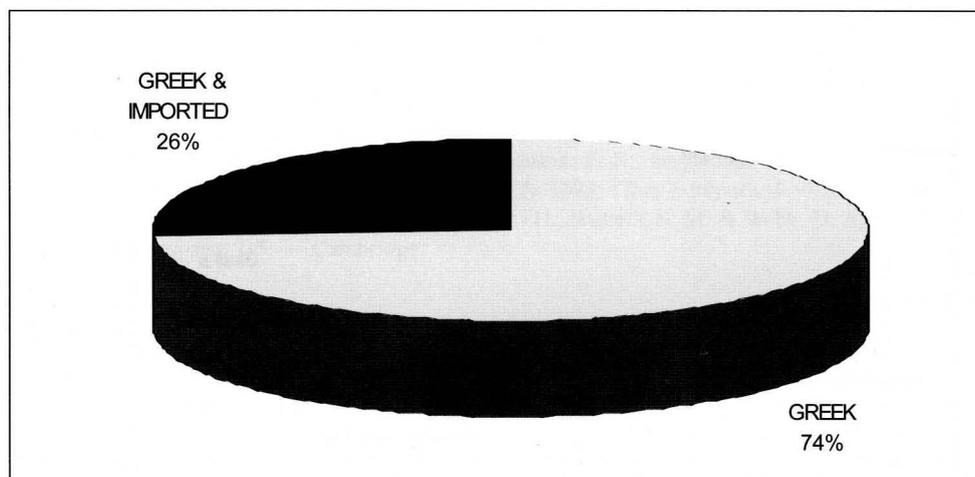


Fig. 1. Origin of the *Labiatae* plants sold in the market of Thessaloniki.

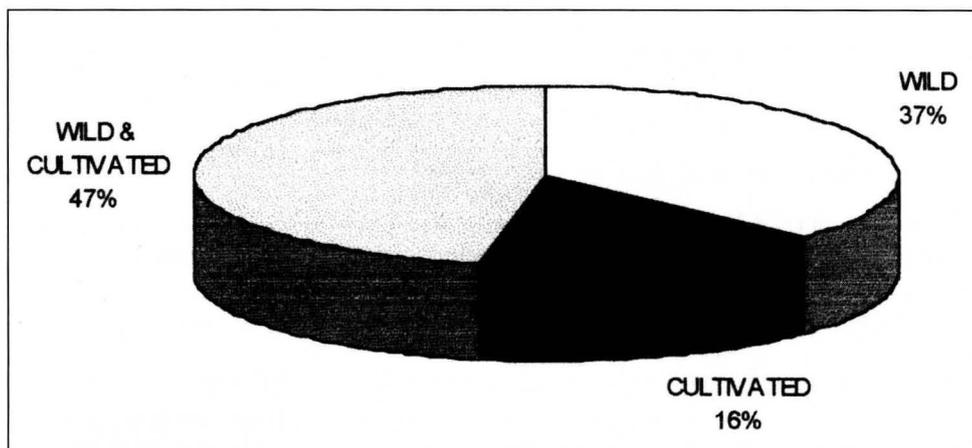


Fig. 2. The different categories of *Labiatae* plants sold in the market of Thessaloniki, in respect to their collection from the wild or from cultivated fields.

to the sellers in the market of Thessaloniki. The most common groups of diseases are the digestive, nervous, urogenital, respiratory, cardiovascular, metabolic, endocrine and the skin diseases (Fig. 4). The most usual healing properties attributed to the *Labiatae* plants by the herbal sellers are stomachic, cathartic, diuretic, expectorant, sedative, antidiabetic etc. There is a variety of healing properties attributed to each plant. Although, there are some *Labiatae* plants which are suggested by all herbal sellers for the same disease. These

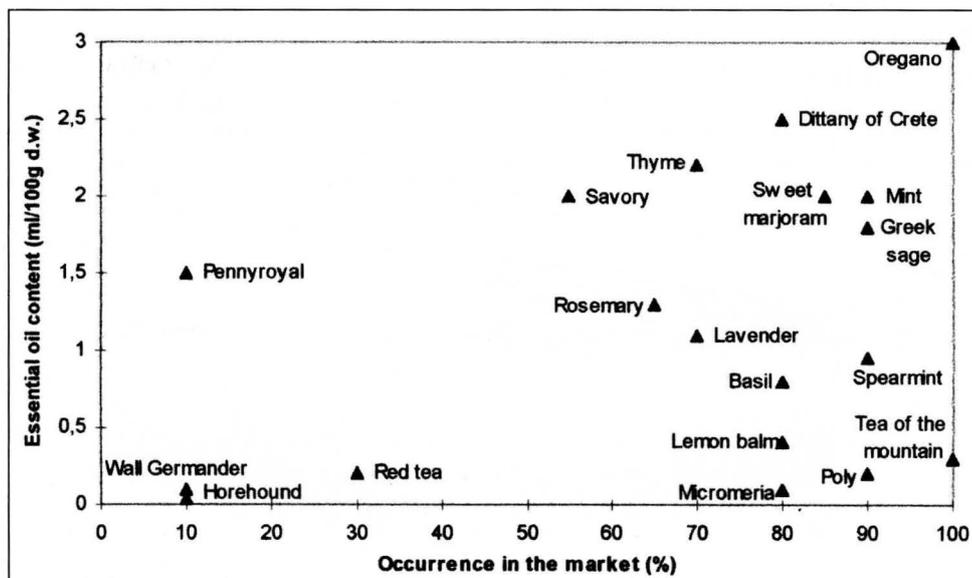


Fig. 3. The essential oil content of the *Labiatae* plants in relate to their occurrence in the market of Thessaloniki.

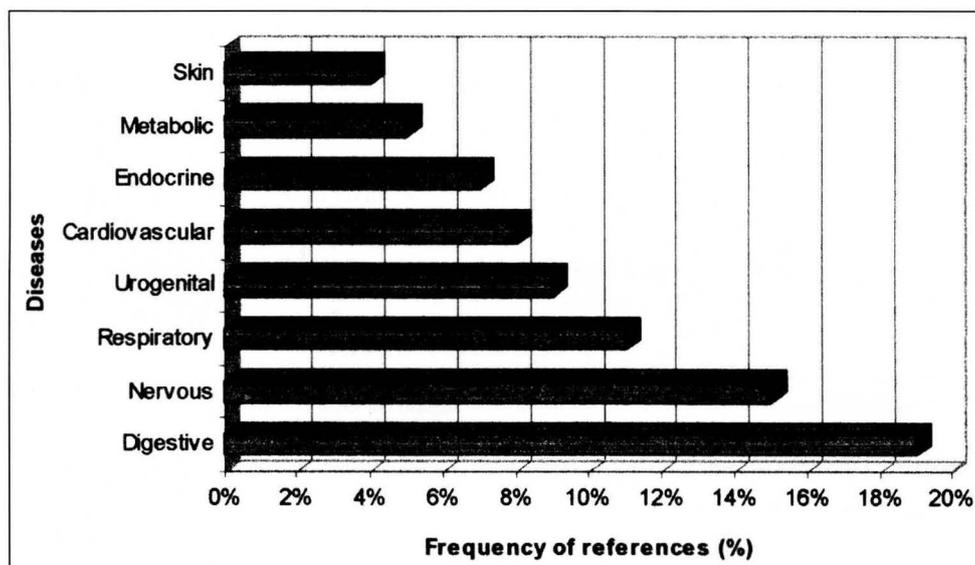


Fig. 4. The most common groups of diseases treated by *Labiatae* plants according to the herbal healers in the market of Thessaloniki (% of the total number of diseases recorded).

are “marjoram”, “dittany of Crete”, “spearmint”, “lemon balm”, “micromeria”, “poly”, “tea of the mountain”, “basil” and “lavender”. These plants are the focal point of our future investigations.

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