THE PROPHYLACTIC AND HEALING EFFECT OF WOODY PLANTS FROM THE SPONTANEOUS FLORA*

Loredana-Maria ILIN-GROZOIU**

Abstract: This study, based on the information provided by the performers from Oltenia, resulting from the personal field researches, aims to analyze the therapeutic action of the woody plants from the spontaneous flora, in the prophylaxis and the healing of various diseases.

In the first part we emphasized the use of the medicinal plants in phytotherapy since ancient times. In the Carpathian-Danubian-Pontic space, the healing with the help of the plants was often associated with various magical practices, the diverse practices of the healer representing ancient legacies, passed from one generation to the next, over time being noticed the constitution of an unwritten code of cures.

In the investigation part, there were exemplified some cure weeds and dendromorphic symbols used by the dwellers of Oltenia for preserving their health, preventing illness and treating various diseases. These plants with a prophylactic and healing effect reveal ancient forms of ethnoiatry. Currently, in the researched area, the phytotherapeutic products, which aim to preserve or restore health, have gained considerable popularity.

Keywords: traditional medicine, cure plants, Oltenia, diseases, sick person.

The present study aims to analyze, through an ethnological approach, the uses of woody plants from the spontaneous flora, for prophylactic and healing purposes by the inhabitants of Oltenia area, in direct connection with the culture of the traditional Romanian community. For this purpose specifically, at national level, a series of researches have been undertaken, highlighting the fact that the perpetuation of the traditional medicine practice, by the inhabitants of the Carpathian-Danubian-Pontic area was due, first of all, to the preservation of medicinal traditions and practices, today phytotherapy still being an important means of treating diseases[1]. The information

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[1] As an example, it ought to be mentioned: Dimitrie Lupaşcu, *Medicina babelor. Adunate de descântece, rețete de doftorii şi vrăjotorii băbeşti*, in "Analele Academiei Române, series II, volume XII,

about the traditional medicine reveals the practices used for healing and contributes to the maintenance of the Romanian specificity and popular identity. Thus, knowing the popular botanical terms helps us to understand the connections that the man of the traditional societies had with everything that surrounded him and to discover the influences that magical thinking and the popular vision of this lexicon had. The complex research of the phenomenology of the traditional medicine provides information on how man related to magic and religion.

In Oltenia, some aspects of this field have been less researched, so that not much is known about the peculiarities of the traditional medicine and the cultural forms based on magic, the symbolism and the syncretism of the traditional medicine, the importance given to the art of healing different conditions, the mental representations on health and disease, etc. In addition to the quite little information coming from the answers to the questionnaires of historians and philologists from the beginning of the 20th century, precious data regarding the traditional medical practices can be found at Charles H. Laugier, one of the greatest gatherers of medical folklore from Oltenia. The French doctor contributed to supporting the popularization and the publication of folklore materials, to the promotion of Oltenia folklore by elaborating two representative works [2], through the columns of the "Arhivele Olteniei" journal, but also of other prestigious periodicals of the time. The unpublished data of Charles H. Laugier resulting from the field researches contributed to solving a spectrum of important problems: the traditional healer and its various practices, known diseases and empirical procedures of treating them, healing with the help of plants, frequently associated with various magical practices etc. As a result, in order to broaden the sphere of ethnobotanical knowledge, detailed research of the traditional medicine of Oltenia is required, in order to identify those traditional therapeutic patterns, to fix and preserve them as an indispensable part of the cultural heritage. Based on the bibliographic material consulted and the one coming from our field researches, the present study proposes a brief presentation of the problem of treatment with woody plants from the spontaneous flora, with a

Bucharest, 1892; D. Bartolomeu, *Cunoaşterea plantelor cu aplicaţiuni la medicina populară*, Bucharest, 1901; Al. Buia, *Plantele noastre medicinale*, Timişoara, 1904; Alexandru Borza, *Plantele de leac*, Orăştie, 1908; Artur Gorovei, M. Lupescu, *Botanica poporului român*, Fălticeni, 1915; M. Eliade, *Ierburile de sub cruce*, in "Revista Fundaţiilor Regale", no. 11, Bucharest, 1939; Valeriu Bologa, *Din istoria medicinei româneşti şi universale*, Bucharest, Academy Press, 1962; Ion Aurel Candrea, *Folclor românesc medical comparat: privire generală. Medicina magică*, Iaşi, Polirom Press, 1999; George Bujorean, *Boli, leacuri şi plante de leac*, Bucharest, Paideia Press, 2001; Camelia Burghele, *Studii de antropologie a sănătăţii. Note pentru legitimarea magică, religioasă şi medicală a actului terapeutic*, Cluj-Napoca, Nereamia Napocae Press, series Ethnos, 2004; Loredana-Maria Ilin-Grozoiu, *Contribuţii la cercetarea medicinei populare din Oltenia*, in "Arhivele Olteniei", New Series, no. 35/2020, pp. 293–304; Idem, *The therapeutic value of the medicinal plants in the respiratory diseases*, in "Anuarul Institutului de Cercetări Socio-Umane «C.S. Nicolăescu-Plopşor»", no. XXII/2021, Craiova, pp. 249–256; Idem, *Ceremonialul culegerii plantelor de leac.* in "Memoria Ethnologică", no. 80–81/2021, pp. 42–53.

[2] Ch. Laugier, *Sănătatea în Dolj. Monografie sanitară*, Craiova, 1910; Idem, *Contribuţiuni la etnografia medicală a Olteniei,* Craiova, 1925.

special attention focused on the names of these plants that attest the cultural specificity of the Romanian people and their curative effect.

The use of plants in order to relieve various sufferings is as old as mankind. For prophylactic and curative purposes, since ancient times, people have turned to plants because they constituted the basic food. Myths, legends, beliefs and superstitions related to plants are a proof of the fact that they had a special significance in human life.

In the Carpathian-Danubian-Pontic space, the traditional remedies against various diseases are ancient legacies, transmitted from generation to generation, in time even appearing an unwritten code of cures. The ancient authors speak in their writings about the knowledge on nature of the Geta-Dacians, about the plants used by them in therapeutics, Dacian names of medicinal plants and mentions regarding the obtaining of the healing products from the vegetal kingdom can be found in the works of Herodotus, Clemens from Alexandria, Jordanes, Plato, Teofrast, etc. For example, according to Plato, the Dacian-Getae priests who practiced empirical medicine had an integralist view that was based on principles similar to those of the school of Hippocrates of Cos[3]. It should be noted that, most of the time, empirical practices were accompanied by magical invocations and the association of protective deity representations.

In the work *On the Means of Healing*, the Greek physician Pedanios Dioscorides from Anazarba (1st century AD) described 600 species of medicinal plants, of which 40 species were specific to the territory of Dacia, 27 plants had Dacian-Thracian names, 8 Latin and 5 Greek names and were marketed in the fortresses of Tomis and Callatis[4].

In the next century, Pseudo-Apuleius mentioned in *the work De medica minibus herbarum*, other 37 healing plants used in Dacia, among which:

> "aniarsexe – glasswort (Salicornia europaea), budathla – bugloss (Anchusa officinalis), chlodela – celery (Apium graveolens), ciborastra – burdock (Arctium lappa), diesema – mullein (Verbascum), dyn – nettle (Urtica dioica), dzena – water hemlock (Cicuta virosa), kardama – reed (Typha), koikodila – winter cherry (Physalis alkekengi), kroustane – greater celandine (Chelidonium majus), mantia – blackberries (Rubus), mizela – summer savoury (Satureja hortensis), etc."[5].

Regarding these healing plants, 11 species with Dacian names are identical to those mentioned by Dioscorides, and 26 species appear only in the writings of Pseudo-Apuleius, being probably gathered directly from the territory of Roman Dacia[6].

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[3] I. H. Crișan, *Medicina în comuna primitivă și la geto-daci*, in "Istoria medicinei românești", Bucharest, Medicală Press, 1972, pp. 27–43.

[4] G. C. Mazăre, *Plantele medicinale în spațiul carpato-danubiano pontic*, in "Bucovina Forestieră" 19(1), 2019, p. 47.

[5] *Ibidem.*

[6] *Ibidem.*

Later, in the Middle Ages, a number of foreign travelers passing by or stationed for a longer period on our territory mention in their writings, the use of medicinal plants by the native population, for the treatment of various diseases.

Plant-based therapeutic indications were also inserted into the Prague Miscellany Slavonic manuscript of the late 14th century known in the Serbian studies and as *Sbornicul de la Hodoș*[7]. In the part with pharmacotherapeutic indications, there were provided cures against colds, gout, against a wasp and snake bite, toothache, rabies, deafening, coughing, headaches, etc. Herbal preparations were prepared by the healing old women or the sick person according to the indications received from the "healers". The healing consisted in combining the empirical element with the magical one, the magic spell therapy being quite widespread.

Recommendations of empirical medicine were also contained in the Slavic-Romanian miscellany manuscript of the first half of the 14th century. In the first 12 pages of the text, there are therapeutic indications against abdominal, ear, eye, teeth, heart pain, cough, dog and snake bite and others[8].

In the XVIst century, there appeared the first documents in the Romanian language, in which it was described how the healing plants were used by the human communities in the Carpathian-Danubian-Pontic space: *Psaltirea Scheiană* (1515) and *Herbarium de la Cluj* (1587).

In order to describe the therapeutic qualities of the woody plants in the spontaneous flora, there will be especially considered the ethnographic area of Oltenia, based on the information of the performers, resulting from our field researches. In this regard, we will bring into discussion the therapeutic preparations with medicinal potential and the range of diseases they treat, based on the local knowledge. In the investigated space, all the parts of the plants of the spontaneous flora, processed as infusions, macerate product, decoction, tincture, ointment, cream, gel or poultice are used in the prophylaxis or the treatment of diseases for their therapeutic qualities. In the simple procedures for processing the plant material, all the plant parts were cited, the leaves being the most used part, followed by the whole plant.

The European Blueberry (Vaccinium rnyrtillus L.) Ericaceae family shrub.

Plant description. Shrub of 10-15 cm in size, growing through wet and stony pastures, through marshy places in the alpine region. The leaves fall off every autumn, the flowers are rosy, and the fruits are black-violaceous.

Therapeutic function. Stomach pains fade with blueberry fruits eaten fresh, dried or leavened in yeast brandy[9].

Kidney diseases are stopped with blueberry leaf tea.

The walnut (Corylus avellana), Betulaceae family shrub.

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[7] See Dușița Ristin, *Fragmentele de medicină populară din manuscrisele slavone din Banat,* in "Romanoslavica", vol. XLVI, no. 3, 2010, pp. 103–112.

[8] B. P. Hasdeu, *Cuvinte din bătríni. Cărtile populare ale românilor in sec. XVI, în legáturá cu literatura poporaná cea nescrisá*, Bucharest, 1879, pp. 181–184.

[9] Inf. Hermina Sârbu, 73 years old, locality of Izimșa, Mehedinți County, 2020.

Plant description: Shrub of 3-5 m, found in the hilly and sub-mountainous areas, at the edge of forests, in glades and meadows. For prophylactic and healing purposes, all parts of the shrub are used.

Therapeutic function. Hazelnut sap is used to treat dartre.

Hazelnut leaf tea is effective for increasing immunity[10]. From dried leaves of hazelnut, an infusion is prepared, four tablespoons of finely chopped plant, in a liter with water, with which wounds are washed or compresses are made[11].

In lung diseases, tea from hazelnut flowers is recommended[12].

Anemia can be treated with hazel leaf juice: "During the flowering of the hazelnut, young hazelnut leaves are harvested, crushed and squeezed out. The juice is mixed with honey and drunk, for a month, 50 ml three times a day, before a mea. In cardiovascular diseases, decoction of dried hazelnut leaves is used for three months"[13].

Colds are treated with dried hazelnut bark powder: "Over three tablespoons of dried hazelnut bark powder, there is poured 1 liter of boiling water which is simmered on low heat for 15 minutes. It is recommended the drinking of two cups a day"[14].

Anemia is treated with nuts, women during pregnancy and the elderly are recommended nuts[15].

The itches on the soles are healed with hot hazelnut rods[16].

The ivy ((lledera helix, L.) hanging plant from the Araliaceae family.

Plant description. Shade-thriving plant, found on the plains and in hilly areas, up to 1500 m altitude. Ivy branches remain green in winter too.

Therapeutic function. Ivy is used as a traditional cure with a curative role in various ailments. For example, atherosclerosis is treated with "brew made of two teaspoons of ivy leaves and twigs in a cup of water. It is simmered for ten minutes and then strained. There should be drunk three cups a day for two weeks. A break is taken and is then resumed. This tea is also good for those who have bronchitis"[17].

In case of rheumatic pains, there are applied compresses with 20 drops of ivy tincture, diluted in a little lukewarm water. Compresses are also good against skin diseases or hair loss when mixed with tincture of chili peppers"[18].

Earache is treated with ivy tincture: "When your ear hurts, put 3-4 heated drops of tincture and sit with your head lying on the other ear for about half an hour. Then

[10] Inf. Ana Ungureanu, 71 years old, locality of Gubandru, Olt County, 2020.
[11] Inf. Elena Ionescu, 70 years old, locality of Corlate, Dolj County, 2020.
[12] Inf. Alexandra Matei, 88 years old, locality of Cârna, Dolj County, 2020.
[13] Inf. Teodora Pescaru, 56 years old, locality of Cioroiu, Olt County, 2020.
[14] Inf. Doina Dinu, 74 years old, locality of Plopșoru, Gorj County, 2021.
[15] Inf. Marina Ilina, 83 years old, locality of Bulzești, Dolj County, 2020.
[16] Inf. Eugenia Ban, 74 years old, locality of Ruda, Vâlcea County, 2021.
[17] Inf. Elena Ionescu, locality of Corlate, Dolj County, 2020.
[18] Inf. Elena Gusatu, 74 years old, locality of Cezieni, Olt County, 2021.

you sit a quarter of hour lying on the other ear. The treatment is done for ten days, three times a day"[19].

Warm ivy leaves are indicated in case of fractures[20].

The Rosehip (Rosa canina L.) Rosaceae family shrub.

Plant description. It grows through bushes, on hills and slopes, near ditches. Quite rarely, it occurs in the mountainous and alpine area. Rosehip has pink or white, large flowers that grow either solitary, in groups of two or three. The flowers and leaves are collected in May – June, in the full flowering phase, and the fruits, the rosehips, are harvested between August and October depending on the species and altitude.

Therapeutic function. In diseases of the stomach, lungs, heart, in the fight against cough and in anemia, there are recommended the rosehip infusions[21].

In treating toothaches, the decoction of rosehip twigs is efficient[22].

The macerated product, made of vinegar and rosehip flowers, is used for rubbing in case of colds[23].

Rosehip fruits have antidiabetic effect and help stabilize blood glucose levels.

Birch tree (Betula verrucosa, Betula alha), Betulaceae family tree.

Plant description. It originates in the southeast Asia and it is found in almost all the forests of Europe. There are about 40 species of birch and there are generally small or medium-sized trees or shrubs. White birch can reach about 22 meters in height, the bark is white, marked by fine, horizontal stripes, and the rhomboid leaves, with a double toothed edge, with a pointed tip, have an intense green color and develop in pairs.

In Romania it grows in the hilly area, it can also be found on the plains and in the mountainous area up to 1500 m altitude. It is recommended that the leaves are picked in late spring and early summer in order to preserve their curative properties as much as possible.

Therapeutic function. In the traditional medicine, almost all the parts of the birch tree are used: bark, leaves, buds and sap. Thus, the birch bark has diuretic, anti-inflammatory, antiseptic, laxative, analgesic and febrifuge properties. It has external or internal use in treating various conditions. "Against muscle and joint pain, ointments, lotions or essential birch oil are used. At the same time, in order to relieve joint pain, a decoction of 3 liters of water, 1 kg of birch bark, 1 kg of poplar bark 100 g of oak bark is made. It is boiled until halved. It is administrated as a quarter of tea, 3 times a day, after eating"[24].

[19] Inf. Gabriela Florescu, 72 de ani, locality of Crasna, Gorj County, 2021.
[20] Inf. Alexandra Matei, locality of Cârna, Dolj County, 2020.
[21] Inf. Elena Nițu, locality of Prundeni, Vâlcea County, 2020.
[22] Inf. Hermina Sârbu, locality of Izimșa, Mehedinți County, 2020.
[23] Inf. Marina Ilina, locality of Bulzești, Dolj County, 2020.
[24] Inf. Eugenia Ban, locality of Ruda, Vâlcea County, 2021.

The infusion from birch bark is a remedy against malignant tumors:

> "it is prepared a decoction of 200 g of shredded birch bark, 100 g of birch buds and 1 liter of water. Boil over low heat until the liquid is halved. Strain it after a few hours and make a one-month course of treatment: in the first week, it is taken a spoonful of birch bark tea, twice a day, before a meal; in the fourth, second and third week, there are taken two tablespoons, three times a day, in the fourth week, one tablespoon of decoction twice a day. There is a month break, then it is resumed. The birch bark infusion relieves fever, treats the flue, skin, liver, gallbladder conditions, or woman illnesses. An effective remedy against freckles is prepared as follows: 100 g of bark powder is left ten days to soak in a liter of red wine, in a dark place and shaken daily. It is applied to the face for a month, 20 minutes, warming it up each time before using"[25].

Birch leaves are recommended for their diuretic and renal disinfectant action, being indicated in nephrotic colic, in the stimulation of kidney function and the elimination of liquids from the body, in combating rheumatism: "An infusion from two teaspoons of leaves per cup of water is prepared, adding a pinch of baking soda, filtering it after six hours and consuming three cups a day"[26].

Birch buds are recommended in case of: respiratory and skin diseases, colds, fever, rheumatic pain, diseases of the kidneys, liver and gallbladder, excessive sweating, allergies: "Prepare a tea from 1 tablespoon grinded buds in 250 ml of hot water. Leave to infuse for ten minutes. Drink three cups a day"[27].

The blackberry plant (Rubus fruticosus L, Rubus caesius L.) herbaceous plant from Rosaceae family.

Plant description. Shrub with sharp claw-shaped thorns. The stem has numerous shoots. The leaves are sharpened at the top-side, with irregular milled edge. The leaves are white and bloom gradually. It grows in forests, bushes, glades, through uncultivated and stony places.

Therapeutic function. From blackberries, it is prepared marmalade, jam, wine and brandy. Dried blackberries that are cooked with rice grains combat coughing[28].

Anemia is treated with infusion from the blackberry bush, yarrow and plantain[29].

The sores heal with green leaves, passed through the fire[30].

In oropharyngeal inflammations it is recommended to gargle with the infusion prepared from four tablespoons of leaves to 1/2 I water[31].

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[25] Inf. Alexandra Matei, locality of Cârna, Dolj County, 2020.
[26] Inf. Elena Toma, 87 years old, locality of Silea, Vâlcea County, 2020.
[27] Inf. Viorica Sârbu, 82 years old, locality of Lunca, Gorj County, 2020.
[28] Inf. Elena Gusatu, locality of Cezieni, Olt County, 2021.
[29] Inf. Marina Ilina, locality of Bulzești, Dolj County, 2020.
[30] Inf. Teodora Pescaru, locality of Cioroiu, Olt County, 2020.
[31] Inf. Violeta Popescu, 63 years old, locality of Apele Vii, Dolj County, 2020.

The hawthorn (Crataegus monogyna Jacq.) thorny shrub from Rosaceae family.

Plant description. It grows through forests, groves, hills and brambles.

Therapeutic function. Heart, circulation and lung diseases are stopped with infusion from the leaves, flowers and fruits of hawthorn.

For the treatment of itches, there are recommended baths are made from boiled leaves or powder made of burnt and ground leaves[32].

The blackthorn (Prunus spinosa L.), thorny shrub from Rosaceae family.

Plant description: Branched shrub, 1-2 m high, found at forest edges, bushes and uncultivated places.

Therapeutic function. In traditional medicine, flowers, leaves and fruits are used in various forms: infusion, decoction, tincture, extracts of buds, juice. Prepared as infusions from the flowers and green and delicate leaves of the shoots, the blackthorn is effective in kidney diseases and urinary infections.

The decoction of dried fruits of blackthorn has a slightly sedative, diuretic-depurative action:

> "Boil about 10 minutes, over low heat, 20 g of dried fruit in 300 ml of water. Strain and drink unsweetened. Against fatigue, the sloes tincture is recommended: 30 g of sloes is left to soak for two weeks in 100 ml of alcohol. Take one teaspoon three times a day before a meal. The juice made of freshly-harvested sloes, consumed late in the autumn, after the first hoar-frost, is given as a cure in stomach pains"[33].

The elderberry (Sambucus nigra L), shrub from the Caprifoliaceae family.

Plant description: Shrub with yellowish-white flowers and black fruits, found both in Europe and Asia. It grows through forests, through brambles, through river coppices and near fences.

Therapeutic function. From our research it results that the elderberry is good for eliminating intestinal worms, as a decoction from branches and elderflowers[34], in diseases of the kidneys, liver, stomach, there are recommended infusions from elderflowers mixed with other healing plants: nettle, acacia, marigold[35].

In rheumatic pains, there are made compresses with green elderberry leaves[36] or administer syrups prepared from elderberries[37].

Skin diseases are treated with a brew from elderberry bark, marigold and chamomile[38].

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[32] Inf. Rozica Ristea, 81 years old, locality of Bechet, Dolj County, 2020.
[33] Inf. Gabriela Florescu, locality of Crasna, Gorj County, 2021.
[34] Inf. Elena Gusatu, 74 years old, locality of Cezieni, Olt County, 2021.
[35] Inf. Elena Ionescu, locality of Corlate, Dolj County, 2020.
[36] Inf. Doina Marsanu, locality of Dragotești, Dolj County, 2021.
[37] Inf. Teodora Pescaru, locality of Cioroiu, Olt County, 2020.
[38] Inf. Gabriela Florescu, locality of Crasna, Gorj County, 2021.

Against cough it is boiled the green peel of elderberry in milk[39].

The Linden Tree (Tilia tamentosa, T. cordata, T. platyph) Tiliaceae family tree.

Plant description. It grows in forests, but it is also cultivated in gardens, parks and in the forest area.

Therapeutic function. The infusion made from linden flowers is used as an adjunct in whooping coughs and colds. For asphyxia, it is recommended the infusion of linden and chamomile flowers, along with hackberry and corn silk. Splinters of linden wood were put on wounds[40].

Since ancient times, certain plant species have had a particularly important role in the existence of the rural communities, these being used in various fields: dyeing materials and decorating household objects, food, cosmetics, treating various ailments. Some woody plants of the spontaneous flora, either as a whole or just parts, are used in the prophylaxis and the treatment of various diseases as: teas, macerates, tinctures, poultices, baths, ointments, syrups, decoctions or fresh. It is important the period and the way of harvesting, the way of drying and storage.

Our field researches have highlighted the fact that, even today, the inhabitants of the investigated space frequently resort to the traditional methods of treatment, phytotherapy continuing to remain an important means of treatment.

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Informer Sârbu Viorica, 82 years old, locality of Lunca, Gorj County, 2020.
Informer Popescu Violeta, 63 years old, locality of Apele Vii, Dolj County, 2020.
Informer Ristea Rozica, 81 years old, locality of Bechet, Dolj County, 2020.
Informer Gusatu Elena, 74 years old, locality of Cezieni, Olt County, 2021.