PLANT CULTURE

Symbolism of plants: examples from European-Mediterranean culture presented with biology and history of art

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NOVEMBER: Chicory

In northern countries only few wild plants flower in November, but the gradually drying stems of the chicory plant persist even in cold winters. The piercing blue flowers appear from late spring right through to late autumn and the strong, deep perennial roots and the flat leaf rosettes protect the plant through the winter. No wonder that chicory was a symbol of perseverance and endless waiting as well as a protector of the martyrs in the Christian Middle Ages. It is also valued as a food and as a remedy.

Biology

Chicory, *Cichorium intybus*, Asteraceae–Liguliflorae, is a roadside plant widely occurring in the temperate zones of Europe, Asia, the USA and Canada, as well as in Australia in the Southern Hemisphere. It is a perennial with long, penetrating taproots and clear blue flowers (Fig. 1). It stores the polysaccharide inulin, a useful dietary carbohydrate. Like many of the Asteraceae it has a bitter latex produced in an articulated laticifer system. Usually *C. intybus* is taxonomically separated from *C. endivia*, the endive (Nicholson et al., 1981; Franke, 1997), and cultivars of both are used for food.

In antiquity, the fleshy root of wild *C. intybus* was used as a vegetable and for various medical purposes, the latter because of some bitter agents (lactucin and lactupicrin). Chicory was taken into cultivation as a food plant in the 17th century (Marzell, 1935; Rivolier, 1985), although recipes including chicory are known from Roman times. Its importance further increased in the 18th century, when a gardener found out that, after roasting, its roots can spice, complement, or even replace, coffee, which was an expensive commodity at that time. When the roots are roasted inulin turns into hydroxymethyl furfural, which gives that taste similar to that of roasted coffee, and this property was exploited widely in periods of financial hardship and recession throughout the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, including during Napoleon’s continental blockade and through the Second World War (Franke, 1997). Today, its cultivated forms are biennials and selections are bred either for the roots which are boiled or for the blanched rosettes which are used widely in salads, with China and the USA as the largest producers.

Throughout history chicory has been recognized as a dietary supplement and medicine (Rivolier, 1985). One of its most valued properties was its activity against human nematode parasites. The various benefits of chicory continue to be exploited today, not only as herbal therapies for humans, but also as a natural remedy for parasites in forage animals (Barry, 1998), a valuable illustration of the accumulated wisdom of physic doctors through the ages.

Symbolism

The growth of chicory on roadsides was regarded as a symbol of its magic. Roadsides were no-man’s land,
places of desolation where the devil lingered at night and suicides were buried (Marzell, 1935; Kandeler, 2006). Chicory is an impressive example of blue-flowering wild plants that have, in the past, been regarded as having apotropaic, i.e. evil-averting forces. This lasted from the Middle Ages until well into the 17th century and superstitious rules developed around its harvest and use (Marzell, 1935). Exact instructions for collecting the plants were provided in the so-called ‘sympathy books’: digging out the long taproot should be undertaken on certain days of the year (St Peter and Paul’s or James’ day), at a certain hour (e.g. at a quarter to two at night) and with a certain tool (a piece of wood struck by lightning, deer antlers or a coin). The complete root when carried on the body, wrapped in a clean handkerchief, could provide protection against enemies, was bullet proof, would split daggers, and tear ropes. Roots of white-flowered forms would even protect against fire (Behling, 1967).

The apotropaic value of chicory is obvious in a panel painting by Francesco Francia from the second half of the 15th century showing Mary with child (today in Alte Pinakothek, Munich). The picture presents them in a rose-grove with Christ as a baby lying against a cushion. Among the various plants growing around the baby are two tall specimens of chicory protecting the newborn child (Kandeler, 2006).

Chicory has also been used to symbolize the force of perseverance in martyrdom, as seen on the St Augustine’s altar from 1487 (Fig. 2). In one of the panels, St Sebastian is shown bound to a tree trunk, arrows piercing his body, accompanied by a large chicory plant standing at his feet.

Fig. 2. Martyrdom of St Sebastian, the Augustinus Altar from 1487 (unknown painter; Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nümburg). Left: Full panel. Right: detail with chicory plant.

References


