



Review

Horticultural Food Plants in Traditional Herbal Medicine in the Mediterranean Basin: A Review

Alessia Cozzolino ¹, Riccardo Motti ^{1,*}, Fabrizio Carteni ¹, Anna De Magistris ², Mara Gherardelli ¹
and Ivana Vitasović-Kosić ³

¹ Department of Agricultural Sciences, University of Naples Federico II, 80055 Portici, Italy; alessia.cozzolino2@unina.it (A.C.); fabrizio.carteni@unina.it (F.C.); mara.gherardelli@gmail.com (M.G.)

² Department of Mathematics and Physics, Università degli Studi della Campania Luigi Vanvitelli, Viale Abramo Lincoln, 5, 81100 Caserta, Italy; anna.demagistris@unicampania.it

³ Faculty of Agriculture, University of Zagreb, Svetošimunska cesta 25, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia; ivitasovic@agr.hr

* Correspondence: motti@unina.it

Abstract: The Mediterranean Basin's diverse climates and ecosystems have shaped a rich botanical heritage through centuries of selective cultivation, resulting in a wide array of horticultural plants with valuable therapeutic properties. The use of horticultural food plants as herbal remedies has become an integral part of traditional medicine in this geographical context. The present review aims to highlight the use of horticultural food plants (HFPs) in the context of traditional herbal medicine in the countries of the Mediterranean Basin and explore their traditional uses and therapeutic properties. A comprehensive ethnobotanical literature search was conducted on the food plants used as herbal medicine in the Mediterranean region using existing online scientific databases. Based on the literature review, 64 taxa used as medicinal plants by traditional users in the Mediterranean Basin were documented. Overall, horticultural plants are used in Mediterranean countries to treat a total of 573 ailments. Italy has the highest number of use reports (998), followed by Morocco (281) and Spain (193). Apiaceae (11 taxa), Cucurbitaceae (9 taxa), and Brassicaceae (8 taxa) are the most frequently cited families. The genus *Allium* is the most abundant in species (5).

Keywords: ethnobotany; traditional plant use; ethnomedicine; medicinal plant; horticulture; food plants



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1. Introduction

Throughout human history, plants have played a fundamental role in various aspects of human existence [1]. Numerous studies have shown that plants can play a dual role, acting simultaneously as medicine and food, as demonstrated by their specific pharmacological effects, which have been emphasized in research on traditional foods [2,3]. As humans evolved from hunter-gatherers to breeders and farmers, they began to cultivate plants for their various needs, and, through the process of domestication, these plants were genetically improved, leading to a gradual but remarkable improvement in their properties [4]. The choice to use traditional medicine and herbal therapies is often driven by geographical and socio-economic factors, especially when access to modern treatments is inadequate and the cost of most conventional medicines is high [5]. In this context, hundreds of wild and cultivated plant species, which constitute an important natural resource in indigenous medicine, are mainly used in herbal preparations. These preparations include effective medicines that have withstood the test of time and often cannot be replaced by modern medicinal alternatives [6,7]. In recent decades, there has been a resurgence of interest in medicinal plants, with numerous species being studied for their pharmacological activities and contributing to advances in drug discovery [8].

Throughout the millennia, the Mediterranean region has witnessed the convergence of diverse cultures, each leaving a significant imprint on the study and utilization of

plants. Today, this rich botanical heritage faces threats from globalization, making the preservation of traditional knowledge paramount. Despite these challenges, many Mediterranean communities, particularly in remote areas, continue to rely on wild plants for various purposes, highlighting the enduring significance of ethnobotanical practices in the region [9–12]. The Mediterranean Basin, with its diverse climates and ecosystems, is home to a rich botanical heritage that has been shaped by centuries of selective cultivation and breeding. This unique environment has led to the cultivation of a wide variety of horticultural plants, many of which have valuable therapeutic properties. The cultural diversity within the Mediterranean Basin, resulting from a complex history of regional and local traditions, enriches herbal knowledge, with each country contributing its own practices and sometimes unique remedies [13,14]. The typical daily Mediterranean diet, known for its emphasis on vegetables, fruits, and spices, often includes both cultivated and wild food species, as their medicinal properties enrich the health qualities of the diet [15–17].

Horticultural plants are grown and cultivated for decorative purposes, landscaping, and gardening, as well as for the production of edible parts which are an important part of the human diet (HFPs). The use of horticultural food plants as herbal remedies has become, over time, an integral part of traditional medicine in various cultures around the world (e.g., [18–20]). However, the extensive European ethnobotanical literature has mainly focused on the therapeutic use of wild plants, giving little space to cultivated species (e.g., [21–23]).

In this context, we reviewed the available literature to thoroughly investigate the role of horticultural food plants in the context of traditional herbal medicine in the Mediterranean region and explore their traditional uses and therapeutic properties. Finally, a comparison was made between the use of different species for the treatment of health disorders in Mediterranean countries.

2. Materials and Methods

A comprehensive ethnobotanical literature search was conducted on the food plants used as herbal medicine in the Mediterranean region using existing online scientific databases, such as Web of Science, Scopus, and Science Direct, as well as Google Scholar. The following keywords and connectors were used: “country” AND “ethnobotanical” OR “ethnobotany”, OR “ethnopharmacological” OR “ethnopharmacology”. Publications were filtered by document type (peer-reviewed articles only), duplicates, and full-text availability; our search strategy was not bound by chronological limits. The abstracts of the articles selected in the previous step were thoroughly screened to determine the actual relevance of the review articles and exclude inapplicable studies. Only articles that contained specific references to the use of horticultural food plants as herbal remedies were considered. The selected articles were read and evaluated in their entirety. Finally, through an extensive evaluation of the documents cited in the “References” of the selected articles, we were able to collect additional articles on the ethnobotany of horticultural plants.

A total of 394 articles from 17 countries were found in the databases, of which 150 contained reports on the use of plants (Table 1). No data on the therapeutic use of horticultural species were available for France, Malta, Syria, and Montenegro. Only herbaceous horticultural plants used as vegetables, greens, or herbs were considered. Species that are used both wild and cultivated (e.g., *Foeniculum vulgare*) were only included if their cultivated status was indicated. The nomenclature followed the World Flora Online [24]. Families were arranged according to APG IV for angiosperms [25]. The authors’ abbreviations were standardized according to Brummitt and Powell [26], as recommended by Rivera et al. [27]. Based on the results obtained, we created a database with the following data: taxon (when helpful due to recent changes in nomenclature, synonyms are given in square brackets), family, parts used, preparation, administration, recorded use, and references. We used a symptom-based nosological approach commonly used in ethnobotanical research to classify plant-treated diseases, as described in the consulted literature [28–30].

Table 1. References researched in the Mediterranean region.

Country	No. of Papers Consulted	No. of Papers in Which Horticultural Food Plant Uses Were Reported
Albania	13	7
Algeria	46	11
Bosnia	7	4
Croatia	11	4
Cyprus	4	2
Egypt	6	3
Greek	7	3
Israel	3	2
Italy	170	78
Lebanon	8	1
Lybia	5	2
Morocco	7	5
Palestine	4	1
Slovenia	2	1
Spain	36	16
Tunisia	5	2
Turkey	58	8
TOTAL	394	150

In order to analyze and understand the relationship between the types of plants used for certain medicinal purposes and the different nations under consideration, we performed a simple correspondence analysis (CA). A correspondence analysis is a statistical technique for examining the relationships between the rows and columns of a table of categorical data. We created a frequency table in which the rows represented the types of use of plants in the medical field and the columns the countries considered. This correspondence analysis made it possible to identify significant associations between specific plants and specific countries, as well as common patterns of use or significant differences in traditional medical practice between different countries. The results of the correspondence analysis were then used for a hierarchical cluster analysis to identify groups of countries with similar patterns of medicinal plant use. Hierarchical clustering builds a hierarchy of clusters, where each object first represents a single cluster and is then combined with other clusters based on its similarity. During the clustering process, the internal variability in each cluster is minimized, and the external variability between clusters is maximized. Minimizing the internal variance helps to ensure that the clusters are homogeneous and that the objects within each cluster have common characteristics, as is the case with the usage patterns of medicinal plants. In hierarchical clustering, different distance measures can be used to evaluate the similarity between objects during the clustering process; in this context, we used Euclidean distance. The statistical analysis was performed with the freely available software R, a software for statistical calculations and graphics (<https://www.r-project.org/> accessed on 18 March 2024). In this study, various R packages were used for data import, manipulation, and analysis. The ‘readxl’ package imported Excel files efficiently, while ‘readr’ enabled the fast reading of large CSV files. For the data analysis, ‘FactoMineR’ was employed for multivariate analyses, such as correspondence analysis (CA), with ‘factoextra’ used to visualize and interpret the results. Data manipulation was primarily handled by ‘dplyr’, part of the ‘tidyverse’ suite, which also includes ‘ggplot2’ for data visualization, ensuring a consistent and reproducible workflow.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. General Data

Based on the literature search, 64 taxa were documented as being used as medicinal plants by traditional users in the Mediterranean Basin (Table 1). In addition, horticultural plants were shown to be used in Mediterranean countries to treat a total of 573 ailments,

as shown in the literature reviewed. Considering the number of reports on the use of each species to treat different ailments in all the countries studied, the total number was 2177. Italy had the highest number of use reports (998), followed by Morocco (281) and Spain (193) (Figure 1A), while Morocco had the highest average number of use reports per publication (56.2), followed by Tunisia (34.0) and Greece (22.0) (Figure 1B).

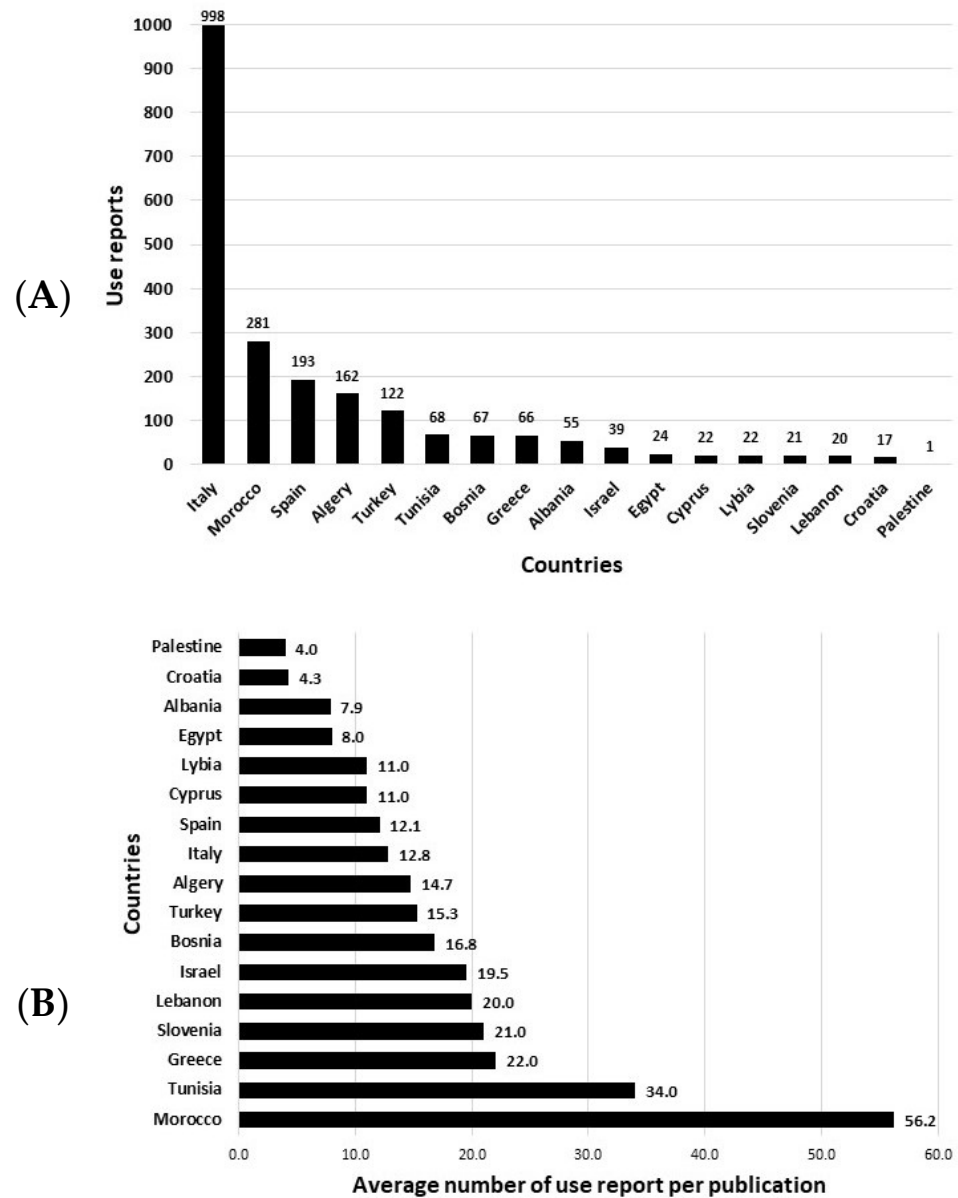


Figure 1. Use reports per country (A) and average number of use reports per publication per country (B).

The cited taxa belonged to 15 families and 45 genera. Apiaceae (11 taxa), Cucurbitaceae (9 taxa), Brassicaceae (8 taxa), Asteraceae (7 taxa), and Fabaceae (6 taxa) were the most frequently cited families. The genus *Allium* was the most abundant in terms of number of species (five), followed by *Brassica*, *Cucurbita*, and *Solanum* (three each). *Allium sativum* and *A. cepa* were the most cited species, followed by the *Petroselinum* spp. and *Ocimum basilicum* (Figure 2).

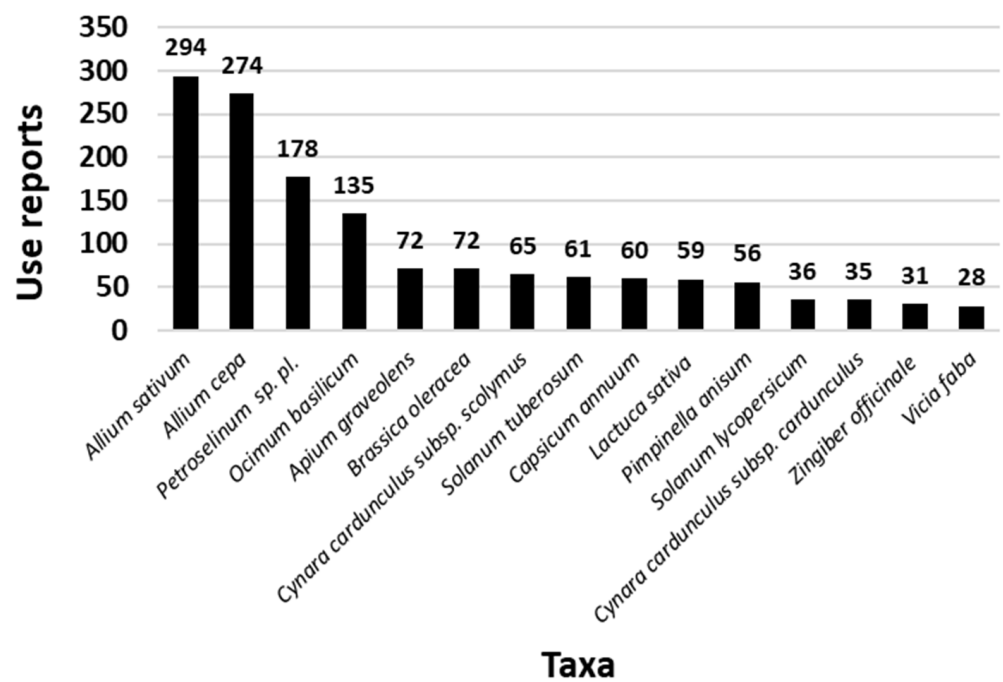


Figure 2. Number of use reports for each taxa (the top 15 most cited taxa are reported here).

Leaves (29.1%) were the most frequently used plant parts, followed by fruits (20.9%) and seeds (18.7%). The remaining parts accounted for a total of 31.2% (Figure 3).

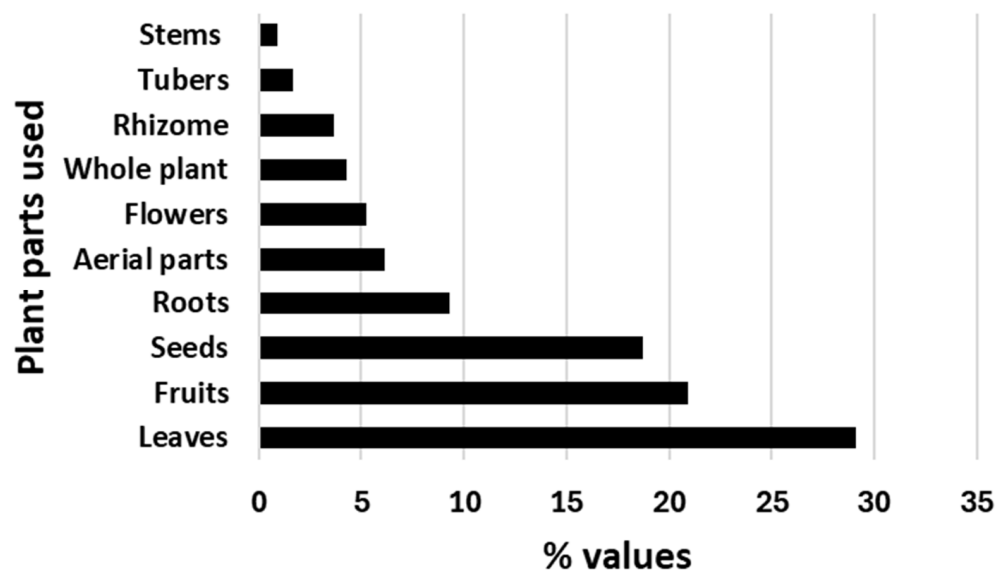


Figure 3. Percentage of use of plant parts in the studied countries.

The most important routes of administration were oral (72%) and topical (27%), while inhalation was rarely reported (Figure 4A). Decoction (31.8%) and raw/fresh (31.7%) were the most important preparation methods, followed by infusion (13.3%), powder (6.2%), and cooking (6.1%) (Figure 4B).

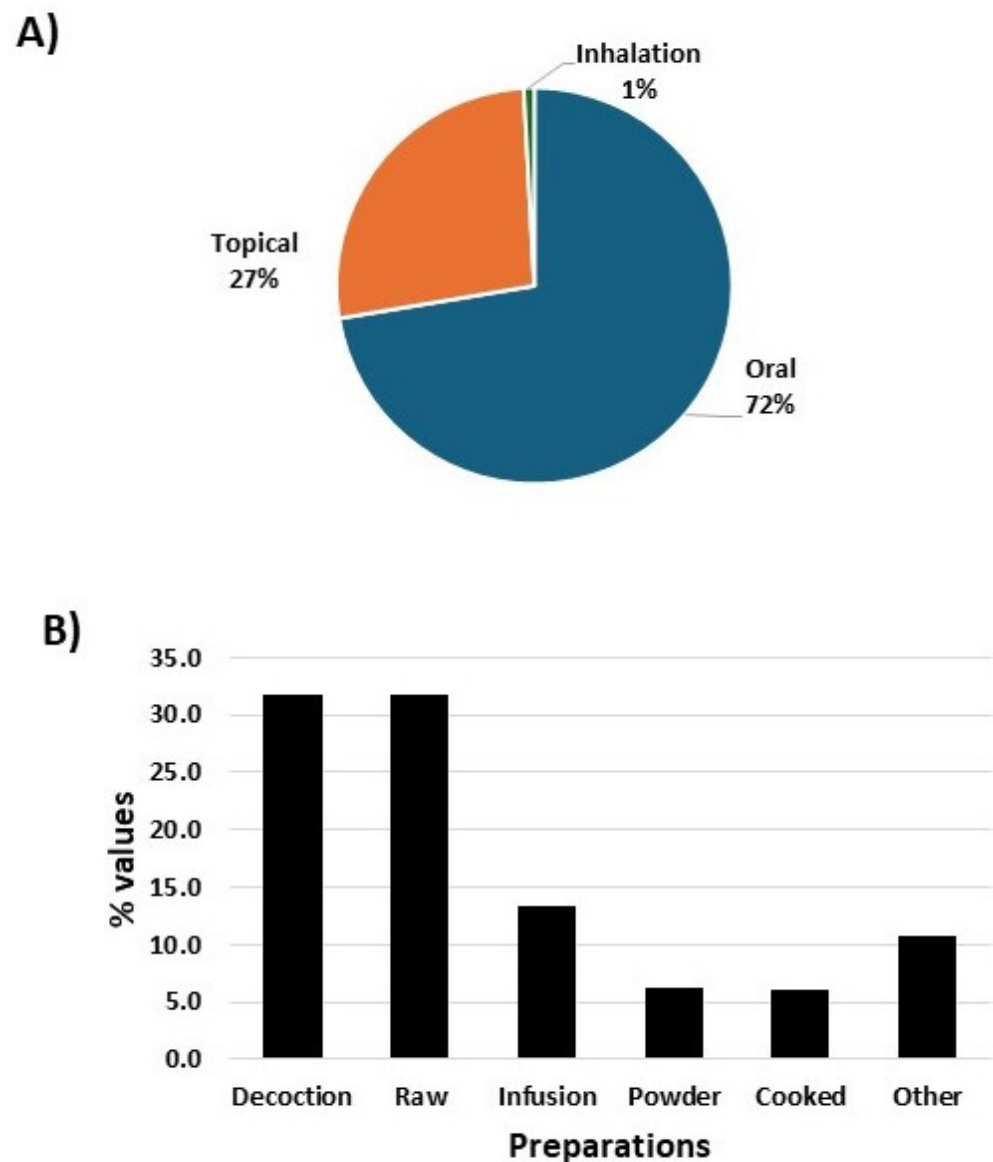


Figure 4. Administration (A) and preparation (B) methods of horticultural plants for ailment treatment in countries of the Mediterranean Basin.

3.2. Phytotherapeutic Applications

Tables 2 and 3 show the extensive use of horticultural food plants for medicinal purposes in Mediterranean Basin countries, covering a wide range of health issues.

Table 2. Percentage of use reports for the nosological categories (in brackets is the total number of citations).

Gastrointestinal System	(113)	% from Total Nr. of Citations
	<i>Colon ailments</i>	37.2
	<i>Stomach ailments</i>	33.6
	<i>Anthelmintic</i>	15.9
	<i>Hepatic ailments</i>	13.3

Table 2. Cont.

		% from Total Nr. of Citations
Cardiovascular system	(68)	
	<i>Blood pressure regulator</i>	33.8
	<i>Heart ailments</i>	19.1
	<i>To lower cholesterol</i>	17.6
	<i>Vascular ailments</i>	11.8
	<i>Anemia</i>	10.3
	<i>Other</i>	7.4
Integumentary system	(54)	
	<i>Skin ailments</i>	75.9
	<i>Hair</i>	14.8
	<i>Other</i>	9.3
Endocrine system	(54)	
	<i>Diabetes</i>	53.7
	<i>Lactation</i>	35.2
	<i>Thyroid</i>	3.7
	<i>Other</i>	7.4
Urinary system	(46)	
	<i>Kidney ailments</i>	89.1
	<i>Bladder ailments</i>	10.9
Reproductive system	(46)	
	<i>Uterine pains</i>	28.3
	<i>Aphrodisiac</i>	17.4
	<i>Prostate</i>	17.4
	<i>Genitals</i>	17.4
	<i>Abortive</i>	6.5
	<i>Childbirth</i>	6.5
	<i>Fertility</i>	6.5
Respiratory ailments	(42)	
Nervous system	(42)	
	<i>Sedative</i>	45.2
	<i>Headache</i>	38.1
	<i>Other</i>	16.7
Muskoloskeletal system	(39)	
	<i>Inflammation</i>	84.6
	<i>Contusions/Fractures</i>	15.4
Other	(23)	
	<i>Fever</i>	60.9
	<i>Alcoholism</i>	13.0
	<i>Other</i>	26.1
Sensorial system	(22)	
	<i>Eye ailments</i>	59.1
	<i>Ear ailments</i>	36.4
	<i>Other</i>	4.5
Teeth	(13)	
Antibacterial	(6)	
Anti-inflammatory	(5)	

Table 3. Cont.

System	Subsystem	<i>Allium sativum</i> L.	<i>Allium cepa</i> L.	<i>Petroselinum</i> sp.	<i>Ocimum basilicum</i> L.	<i>Apium graveolens</i> L.	<i>Brassica oleracea</i> L.	<i>Cynara cardunculus</i> L. subsp. <i>scolymus</i>	<i>Solanum tuberosum</i> L.	<i>Capsicum annuum</i> L.	<i>Cuminum cyminum</i> L. (<i>Apiaceae</i>)	<i>Lactuca sativa</i> L.	<i>Pimpinella anisum</i> L.	<i>Carum carvi</i> L.	<i>Daucus carota</i> L.	<i>Coriandrum sativum</i> L.	<i>Anethum graveolens</i> L.	<i>Solanum lycopersicum</i> L.	<i>Cynara cardunculus</i> L. subsp. <i>cardunculus</i>	<i>Beta vulgaris</i> L.	<i>Fragaria</i> spp.	<i>Zingiber officinale</i> Roscoe	<i>Cucurbita pepo</i> L.
Cardiovascular system	Pressure regulator	62	7	7	2	2		3		8	1	2		1	2			1	1		1		
	To lower cholesterol	4	3	1	1	1		6		1									3				
	Heart ailments	2		1	2					2			2	1		1				1	2		
	Haemostatic	1		6						1											1		
	Vascular ailments						6											2				1	
	Anemia			2																	4		
	Atherosclerosis	2																					
Respiratory system	Respiratory ailments	22	49	6	16	1	9		9	1	5	5	5	2	8	1				3	4	5	1
Urinary system	Kidney ailments	3	29	29	5	18	2	8			6	5	4	3	4	1	8	8	2	2	5	2	2
	Bladder ailments			1		1										1						1	

Table 3. Cont.

System	Subsystem	<i>Allium sativum</i> L.	<i>Allium cepa</i> L.	<i>Petroselinum</i> sp.	<i>Ocimum basilicum</i> L.	<i>Apium graveolens</i> L.	<i>Brassica oleracea</i> L.	<i>Cynara cardunculus</i> L. subsp. <i>scolymus</i>	<i>Solanum tuberosum</i> L.	<i>Capsicum annuum</i> L.	<i>Cuminum cyminum</i> L. (<i>Apiaceae</i>)	<i>Lactuca sativa</i> L.	<i>Pimpinella anisum</i> L.	<i>Carum carvi</i> L.	<i>Daucus carota</i> L.	<i>Coriandrum sativum</i> L.	<i>Anethum graveolens</i> L.	<i>Solanum lycopersicum</i> L.	<i>Cynara cardunculus</i> L. subsp. <i>cardunculus</i>	<i>Beta vulgaris</i> L.	<i>Fragaria</i> spp.	<i>Zingiber officinale</i> Roscoe	<i>Cucurbita pepo</i> L.
Musculoskeletal system	Inflammation	14	8	7	2	7	24	3	1	27	2	1	1	3		4		2	2		3	3	
	Contusions	1	2																	2			
Nervous system	Sedative			2	23	3	1				2	8	3	1		4	3				4	1	
	Headache	2	1	4	9		3		15	2	1					1	1					2	1
	Epilepsy				1											4							
	Aphrodisiac					2										2							
	Hemiplegia		1																				
Endocrine system	Diabetes	6	9	4	2	3		6		1	1		2	3	1	1			3		1	1	
	Galactagogue		7	5	6	1					3	2	5	5		2	5			2	1		
	Galactofugue			8																			
	Sweating		2																				
	Diaphoretic			1																			
	Lipolytic															1							

The species most commonly used for various health conditions are described below. The references are shown in Table S1.

- Gastrointestinal System

The large number of reports on the use of gastrointestinal remedies suggests that horticultural plants play an important role in traditional folk medicine in the treatment of digestive problems and the maintenance of intestinal health, with anthelmintics and liver diseases also accounting for a significant proportion. The diversity of herbal remedies for gastrointestinal complaints indicates a rich knowledge base within the community for the treatment of such problems. Thirteen plant species are commonly used for their digestive properties and are administered in different ways. For example, the seeds of *Cucumis melo*, *Cucurbita pepo*, and *Daucus carota* can be eaten raw or used to prepare decoctions. The leaves of *Beta vulgaris*, the roots of *Raphanus sativus*, and the fruits of *Capsicum annuum* can be eaten either raw or after cooking due to their digestive effect. Digestive decoctions can also be made from the pistils of *Crocus sativus*, the leaves of *Lactuca sativa*, and the bracts of *Cynara cardunculus* subsp. *cardunculus*. Stomach pains and hyperacidity are usually treated with a decoction of the leaves of *Ocimum basilicum*, the fruits of *Petroselinum* spp., or a decoction of the bulbs of *Allium cepa* and *A. sativum*. Carrots, radishes, and broad beans are eaten to treat diarrhea. Both cholagogue and choleric plants are used in traditional and alternative medicine to support the health of the digestive system and treat ailments related to the production and flow of bile. The most commonly reported plants for this purpose are *Cynara cardunculus* (bracts and leaves for infusions), *Petroselinum* spp. (aerial parts for raw consumption), and *Solanum melongena* (fruits for decoctions). The most commonly reported anthelmintic is garlic (*Allium sativum*), which is taken orally, raw, or as a decoction and, sometimes, even inhaled. The seeds of some species of the cucurbit family (Cucurbitaceae) are also consumed as anthelmintics (*Cucumis sativus*, *Cucurbita maxima*, *C. moschata*, and *C. pepo*). For some species (e.g., *Cicer arietinum*, *Petroselinum* spp., and *Allium schoenoprasum*), regional use as an anthelmintic has been identified.

- Integumentary System

As far as the integumentary system is concerned, horticultural species are mainly used to treat skin diseases but also contribute to the treatment of hair diseases. This emphasizes the importance of these plants in the treatment of dermatological problems, wound care, and the improvement of skin and hair health in traditional medical practice. Many of the species mentioned are used to locally soothe and heal burns, including the raw leaves of *Apium graveolens*, the cooked leaves of *Beta vulgaris*, the raw fruits of *Cucumis sativus* and *Cucurbita pepo*, and the raw roots of *Daucus carota*. For minor skin inflammations such as pimples or larger inflammations with pus, boiled leaves of *Brassica oleracea* are applied to the affected area, while, for mastitis and rhagades, roasted leaves of the same species are applied topically. Raw bulbs of *Allium sativum*, raw leaves of *Petroselinum* spp., or, as a decoction, raw fruits of *Solanum lycopersicum* or slices of raw tubers of *Solanum tuberosum* are used to relieve the itching of insect bites. A poultice made from the raw roots of *Raphanus sativus* subsp. *sativus* is not used to improve the condition of facial skin but to remove spots on the face, fade freckles, and reduce the effects of oily skin. The most commonly cited species is *Allium cepa*, which is also used for digestive complaints. Raw onion bulbs without the outer bracts are used for burns, wound healing, insect bites, and also hair loss. Alternatively, the scales of the onion fried in oil are applied to blisters, pimples, etc., to speed up healing and heal purulent skin abscesses caused by thorns.

- Cardiovascular System

The presence of horticultural herbal remedies for cardiovascular health is noteworthy, as it reflects the potential of these plants to play a role in traditional medicine in supporting heart health and treating related problems. Horticultural species used to treat hypertension include various plants and herbs that have potential medicinal properties. Decoctions or macerates from the bulbs of *Allium sativum* and *A. cepa* are widely known as a means of

lowering blood pressure. In addition, the fruits of *Capsicum annuum* and the juice from the leaves of *Lactuca sativa* are used to treat high blood pressure. *Allium* and *Petroselinum* species are also eaten raw to lower cholesterol levels.

- Respiratory System

The use of garden plants for the respiratory system is another interesting finding. From the use reports, it appears that certain plants are considered effective for treating respiratory ailments, which could be helpful in traditional herbal medicine for treating ailments such as coughs, colds, and other respiratory ailments. Among these plants, the species *Allium cepa* and *A. sativum* are often mentioned for the treatment of respiratory diseases. The bulbs are used raw or to make decoctions or tinctures. A decoction made from the leaves of *Lactuca sativa* appears to be effective in treating some respiratory symptoms.

- Urinary System

Plants used for problems with the urinary tract are mainly used as diuretics or to treat and prevent kidney stones. The most commonly cited remedies for the treatment of urinary tract disorders include the raw consumption of *Apium graveolens* stems and the decoction of *Asparagus officinalis* roots and *Petroselinum* spp. outer parts.

- Musculoskeletal System

The use of HFPs in folk phytotherapy for the treatment of musculoskeletal disorders is mainly due to the therapeutic potential of these plants, which often have anti-inflammatory, analgesic, and muscle-relaxing properties. The species most frequently mentioned in this context is *Brassica oleracea*, whose leaves, roasted or boiled, are used externally to treat rheumatism, bruises, joint pain, and tendonitis. Tinctures or macerates made from the fruits of *Capsicum annuum*, the leaves of *Petroselinum* spp., or the bulbs of *Allium sativum* are used externally to treat rheumatisms.

- Endocrine System

Reports on the use of HFPs for hormonal and metabolic imbalances in traditional folk medicine indicate their use for the endocrine system. In this regard, lactation and diabetes are the main categories for which these plants are used. The bulbs of *Allium cepa*, whether raw or cooked, are the main parts of the plant used as a galactagogue. The leaves and fruits of *Ocimum basilicum*, *Anethum graveolens*, *Beta vulgaris*, and *Petroselinum* spp. are also used for the same purpose. The fruits of *Lupinus albus* are used as a remedy for type 2 diabetes. Raw bulbs of *Allium cepa* and a decoction of the bracts and leaves of *Cynara cardunculus* subsp. *cardunculus* are used for the same metabolic disorder.

- Nervous System

The medicinal properties of these plants, which have a calming effect and relieve headaches, are also used to treat disorders of the nervous system. A decoction of the leaves of *Ocimum basilicum* is often used as a sedative, while slices of the tubers of *Solanum tuberosum* are placed on the forehead to relieve headaches.

Other uses include fighting fevers, treating alcoholism, and treating sensory system problems such as eye and ear conditions. Garden plants also have antibacterial and anti-inflammatory properties, contribute to dental health, and serve as a remedy for various ailments that do not fall into other categories.

3.3. Geographical and Botanical Distribution Data

The results of the correspondence analysis (Figure 5) and clustering (Figure 6) show four different clusters of nations, each characterized by specific patterns of plant use. For each cluster, the plants and the type of use that most strongly characterize the cluster are indicated.

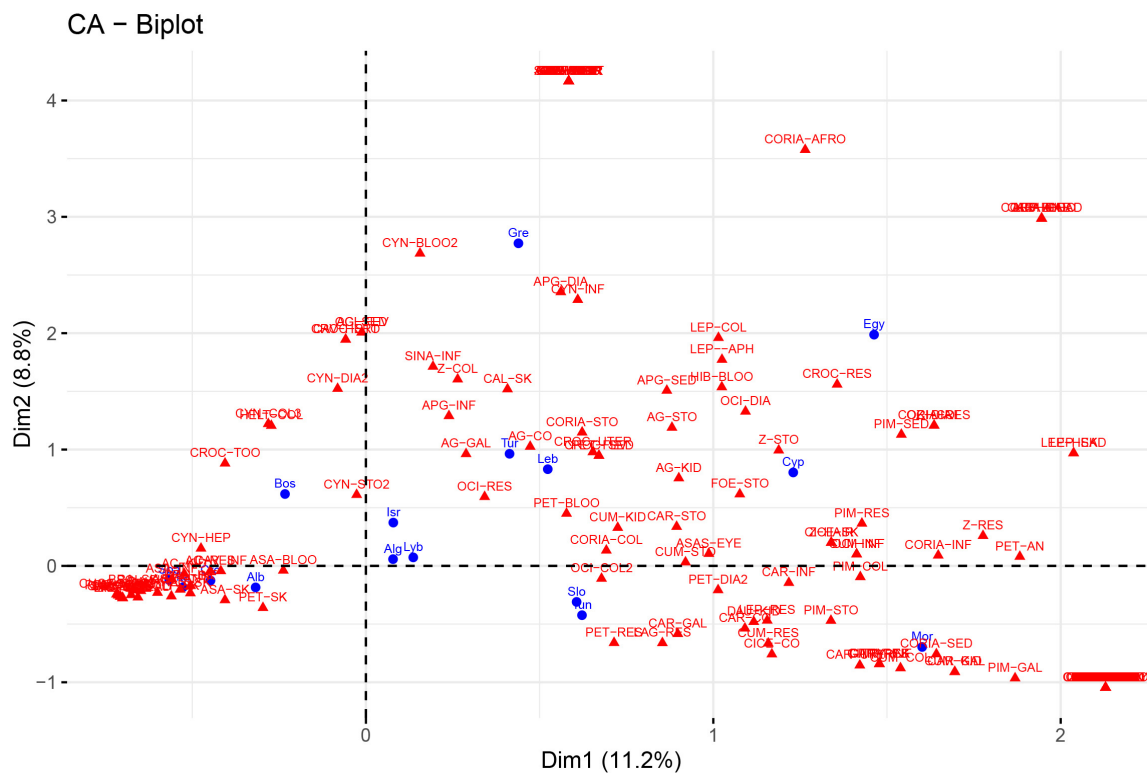


Figure 5. Representation of the factorial map of the two variables under study: use of plants and nations.

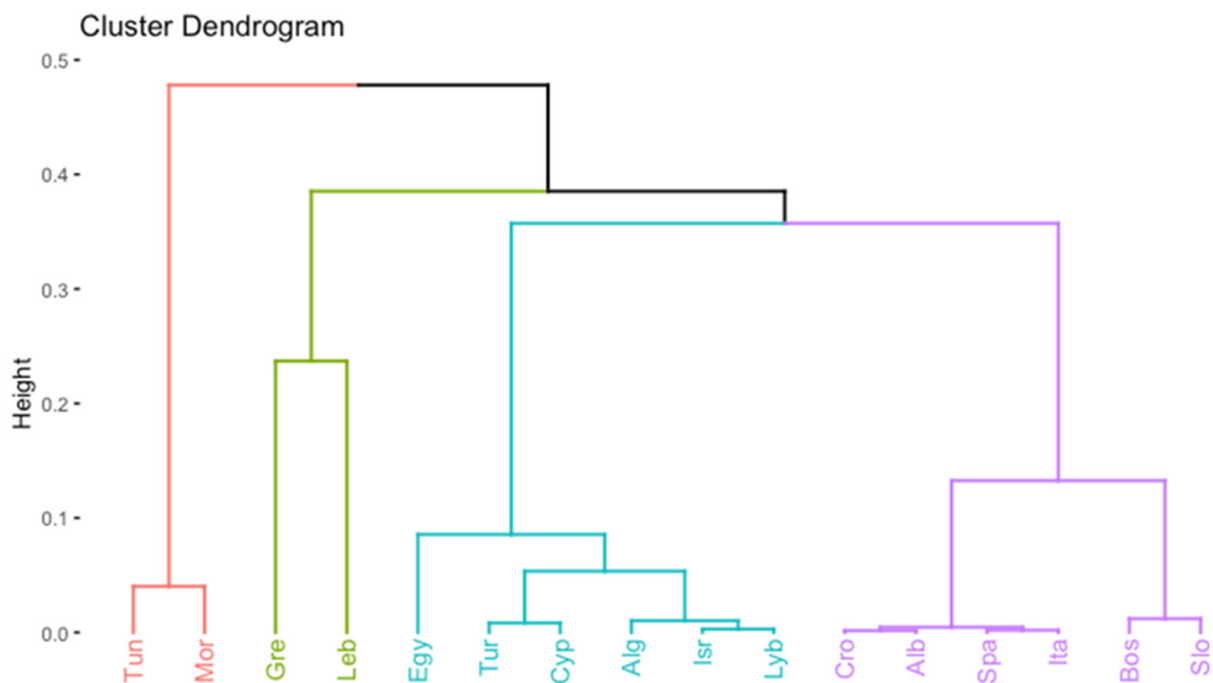


Figure 6. Dendrogram: cluster analysis to determine the characterizations of different uses of plants in various countries.

In the purple cluster represented by six countries from the north-western to the eastern Mediterranean (Spain, Italy, Croatia, Albania, Slovenia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina), we observe the use of different medicinal plants with specific applications:

Allium cepa, *Solanum lycopersicum*, and *S. tuberosum* are used to treat skin diseases;

Allium sativum is used as an anthelmintic and for the treatment of diabetes and skin diseases;

Anethum graveolens is used for the treatment of kidney diseases;

Brassica oleracea is used for the treatment of skin diseases;

Coriandrum sativum is used to treat intestinal complaints;

Ocimum basilicum is used as a galactagogue;

Petroselinum spp. is used to induce miscarriages.

This characterization indicates a wide range of medicinal plant uses within the group, with particular emphasis on the treatment of skin diseases and intestinal disorders, as well as specific uses as an anthelmintic or abortifacient substance and for the treatment of diabetes and kidney disease.

In green group 2, represented by Greece and Lebanon, a specific use of some medicinal plants can be observed:

Cynara cardunculus subsp. *scolymus* is used to regulate blood pressure, lower cholesterol, and treat diabetes;

Sinapis alba is used for respiratory diseases.

This characterization underlines the specific use of these medicinal plants within the group, with a focus on the treatment of respiratory diseases and the regulation of blood pressure, cholesterol, and diabetes.

In red group 3, represented by Tunisia and Morocco, we observe an interesting concentration in the use of various medicinal plants for the treatment of musculoskeletal inflammation:

Sesamum indicum, *Raphanus sativus* subsp. *sativus*, *Pimpinella anisum*, *Lupinus albus*, *Ocimum basilicum*, *Cucumis sativus*, and *Capsicum annuum* are used for skeletal muscle inflammation.

This characterization shows a tendency in the group towards the use of medicinal plants for the specific treatment of inflammation of the musculoskeletal system.

In group 4, in a blue color, which is represented by six countries in the south-eastern Mediterranean (Egypt, Turkey, Cyprus, Algeria, Israel, and Libya), a broad use of various medicinal plants for the treatment of a range of diseases can be observed:

Sesamum indicum is used for skin and respiratory diseases;

Brassica rapa is used for respiratory diseases;

Foeniculum vulgare is used to treat cholesterol;

Petroselinum spp. is used as a galactagogue;

Lepidium sativum is used for stomach and intestinal complaints;

Anethum graveolens and *Cucumis sativus* are used for stomach complaints;

Asparagus officinalis is used as an anti-inflammatory for muscles, diabetes, and gut health;

Apium graveolens is used as a sedative;

Beta vulgaris is used to treat anemia;

Coriandrum sativum is used for intestinal complaints.

This cluster shows a wide range of medicinal plants used to treat a variety of conditions, with a focus on gut health, stomach and respiratory problems, and the treatment of cholesterol and anemia.

The identified clusters indicate different regional preferences and traditions in the use of medicinal plants and reflect differences in the health practices and cultural influences between nations. In summary, our analysis clarifies the relationship between types of medicinal plants and nations and reveals different patterns of plant use in different geographical regions.

This clustering approach also provides an overview of the geographical and possible cultural relationships between the countries and enables meaningful grouping based on geographical proximity and cultural similarities (Figure 7). In particular, cluster 1 groups together countries that share a common geographical location in Southern Europe and cultural similarities based on their Mediterranean heritage and historical interactions. Clusters 3 and 4 group northeastern and North African countries that share some cultural

similarities beyond their geographic location, including aspects of Arab (except Israel) and Mediterranean influences. Cluster 2 is clearly characterized by the use of certain plants against certain diseases.

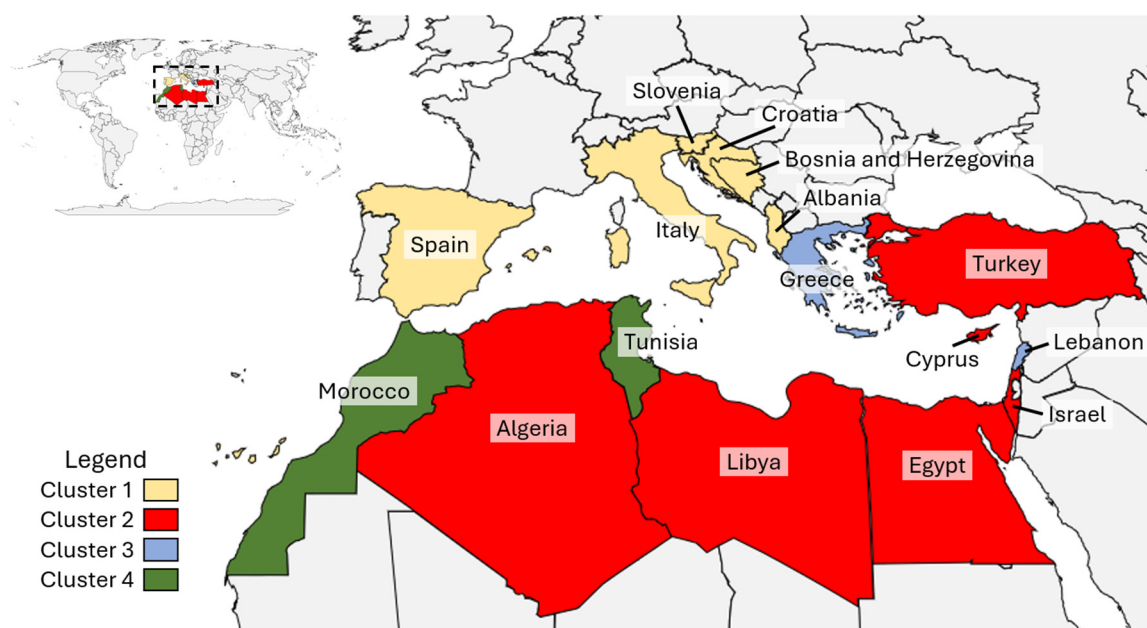


Figure 7. Geographical distribution of clusters.

3.4. Economic Botanical Value and Effective Possibilities of Use

The studies we included in this review show that horticultural food plants (HFPs) are used in all Mediterranean countries not only for human consumption but also for therapeutic purposes. Their use is often closely linked to local climatic conditions and traditional knowledge. Edible plants are referred to as functional foods due to their nutraceutical and therapeutic properties that go beyond their simple nutritional function [31,32]. Moreover, thanks to their vitamin and antioxidant content, these plants can play an important role in promoting health and preventing various diseases [33–35]. The use of HFPs in traditional medicine offers several advantages. For example, cultivated plants are often more readily available and more consistent in quality and quantity than wild-harvested plants. This reliability is important for traditional healers or individual consumers who need a constant supply of plant materials. In addition, HFPs are often accessible to larger populations, making traditional remedies based on these plants more available to those in need. The cultivation of HFPs enables the transmission of knowledge and practices related to their use from one generation to the next. This intergenerational transmission of knowledge is crucial for the preservation of traditional medicine. From an economic perspective, cultivated plants can be better suited for pharmacological research and the standardization of active ingredients, making them more attractive to modern health systems and research. In addition, HFPs can be subjected to quality control to ensure that no impurities are present and that their medicinal properties are maintained, which is often more difficult with wild, harvested plants. In this context, HFPs can either serve as a beneficial economic alternative to traditional horticulture or an integral part of it. In addition, the cultivation of horticultural food crops as herbal remedies can provide a sustainable socio-economic opportunity, especially for farmers in regions with less-than-optimal growing conditions or in areas where traditional horticulture does not provide sufficient income. Overall, the economic benefits of growing HFPs as herbal remedies could make it an attractive option for individuals and companies looking to diversify their agricultural activities and benefit from emerging markets for herbal medicines, which could also help stabilize populations in rural areas. The present research highlights the diverse strengths of utilizing horticultural

food plants (HFPs) in traditional medicine, including their role in preserving cultural knowledge, accessibility, and economic viability. However, potential weaknesses such as the risk of biodiversity loss, dependency on specific plant species, and environmental impact need to be carefully addressed to ensure the sustainability of these practices and their benefits for both health and society.

4. Conclusions

In summary, these results demonstrate the diverse use of garden plants in folk phytotherapy and illustrate their role in the treatment of a wide range of health problems in different body systems in Mediterranean countries. The role of ethnobotanical studies is to avoid the loss of traditional knowledge about the use of food plants and, at the same time, provide the basis for the discovery of new medicines through phytochemical and biochemical research. By integrating traditional knowledge with modern scientific approaches, there is significant potential to discover novel therapies and enhance the understanding of the therapeutic uses of garden plants, thereby contributing to both cultural preservation and medical advancements. In this respect, new field studies in the Mediterranean region targeting specific knowledge of horticultural food plants are desirable.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/horticulturae10070684/s1>: Table S1: Horticultural food plants used in the Mediterranean Basin as traditional herbal medicine are listed in a complete table with detailed information from the reviewed articles. References [36–177] are cited in the Supplementary Materials.

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