

**Sacred Animals and
Exotic Tropical Plants**



MAYAN MEDICINAL PLANTS

REVUE

contents

14 **ROADS TO ADVENTURE**
by Capt. Thor Janson

Carnival at
Sugar Town
(Mazatenango)



- 12 **GUATEMALA INSIGHT**
by Elizabeth Bell
Casa Popenoe
- 18 **AMALIA'S KITCHEN**
by Amalia Moreno-Damgaard
A Taste of Valentine's Day
- 20 **DATEBOOK HIGHLIGHT**
Exhibition
Contemporary Huipiles
- 21 **DATEBOOK HIGHLIGHT**
Film Premier
Maximón—Santo o Diablo
- 32 **DATEBOOK HIGHLIGHT**
Sculpture Exhibit
When the River Rumbles...
- 34 **DATEBOOK HIGHLIGHT**
by Benjamin Reeves
Guatemala's NGO Community
- 36 **DATEBOOK HIGHLIGHT**
Annual Picnic for Charity
Finca El Zapote
- 38 **BOOK ALERTS**
Mayan Whitewater
Pepín, el camarón marinero soy

- 54 **SACRED ANIMALS and EXOTIC TROPICAL PLANTS**
by Dr. Nicholas M. Hellmuth
Mayan Medicinal Plants
- 64 **LANGUAGE**
by Dwight Wayne Coop
The Zen of... Red Tape
- 68 **FOOD FOR THOUGHT**
by Shannon McCullough
The Best of Everything
- 72 **THE TAX CORNER**
by John Ohe
Q & A Forum
- 76 **2014 SPIRIT**
by Sri Ram Kaa & Kira Raa
Sweet Home Guatemala
- 82 **GREAT DESTINATIONS**
by Tara Tiedemann
Explore More and Go Deeper
- 107 **SENSUOUS GUATEMALA**
by Ken Veronda
Tony

pg. 32



SECTIONS

- 22 DateBook: February
39 Health Services
80 Travel
96 Marketplace
98 Real Estate
104 El Salvador
105 Mexico

REGIONS

- 31 Guatemala City
44 La Antigua
83 Lake Atitlán
88 Quetzaltenango
89 Río Dulce
90 Pacific Coast
94 El Petén
94 Cobán
95 Tecpán

MISC.

- 10 From the Publisher
40 Vet Q & A
45 MAP: La Antigua
70 Bilingual Crossword
85 MAP: Lake Atitlán
106 Advertiser Index

photo contest: **Love in Guatemala**
All of the Feb. entrants can be seen at
www.Revue.gt ... here are the winners

- 6 José Antonio García Aguirre
78 Flor Ortíz
102 Héctor Meléndez
102 Mónica Mariel Rodríguez
103 Gilberto José Ramírez Figueroa
103 Luis Morataya

Deadline for the
March 2014 issue » Feb. 10

Sacred Animals and Exotic Tropical Plants

text & photos by
Dr. Nicholas M. Hellmuth



Pericón has so many uses in traditional Mayan culture that it would take an entire article just to describe the benefits of this member of the marigold family: it is used in medicine, as a colorful dye in native clothing, and as a tasty flavoring among many other uses.

(STACKED FOCUS BY NICHOLAS HELLMUTH, NIKON D800E, 36 MEGAPIXEL, 60MM MACRO LENS)

Mayan Medicinal Plants

Two thousand years ago the Maya peoples had abundant sources of natural medicine from plants. It is sometimes thought that “primitive” societies had mostly witch doctors and chants for healing. But considering how the Greeks, Romans and medieval Europeans managed illness and medicine, frankly I would rather be a patient in a Mayan treatment center than anywhere in Europe!

The Maya of 2,000 years ago would be difficult to label as “primitive.” They maintained international trade relationships north through Mexico and south at least to Costa Rica. At Tikal, in the Tomb of the Jade Jaguar, the ruler had decorations of spondylus

shells (commonly called thorny oyster). Harvested by skilled divers, these shells with extremely fragile spines are generally identified as coming from lower Central America. Thus, they were traded over long distances.

This ruler also had jadeite implants in most of his teeth. So the dentists of A.D. 850 had methods to drill into the teeth and had adequate pain killer for this operation.

Being a student at Harvard in the “New Age” 1960s influenced my interest in studying subjects that were far outside my normal fields. Archi-

tecture was what I initially majored in, but after finding cacao in a ninth century vase and discovering a painting of a high-status individual enjoying smoking a cigar (in the royal tomb I found under a pyramid in Tikal), I developed an interest in studying plants. Living in the neotropical seasonal rain forests of Tikal for 12 months at age 19, and then five years working to create the Parque Nacional Yaxhá, definitely instilled me with a curiosity about plants the Maya had available.

In my list of circa 400 utilitarian native plants of the Maya peoples, I specifically did not list the medicinal plants since these have already been carefully studied and cataloged by botanist Armando Cáceres and by

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Tobacco flowers from the FLAAR Mesoamerica botanical garden, Guatemala City, elevation about 1,500 meters. Tobacco is a great garden flower and for the intellectually curious, there is a lot more to tobacco than merely smoking it: Tobacco is a popular medicine in many countries of the Americas.

many botanists of USAC and Universidad del Valle. There are also many well-known studies of medicinal plants of the Maya of Yucatán, medicinal plants of the Aztec, etc. So I decided to focus on edible plants and plants used for all other daily purposes: for making soap, for tanning leather, for house construction, for basketry, etc.

These themes needed much more research since the many monographs on Mayan agriculture and silviculture while helpful, remained focused, sometimes even fixated, on the standard plants that are always discussed. However, after many years of studying utilitarian plants, especially herbs and spices, I noticed how many of the plants that I was studying were also medicinal.

For example, tobacco is also considered a medicinal plant, as has already been well documented by many scholars. Not long ago I no-

ticed a tobacco plant growing in the front of a Mayan house in a village deep into the Ixil-speaking Highlands, high above Nebaj. The resident said the plant was for medicine. I have also found other medicinal plants that were added to tobacco.

Cacao was even more often used as a beverage of choice to deliver medicine to the body.

So I have begun to study medicinal plants in more detail. My primary interest is to raise awareness by finding and photographing in high resolution the flowers that identify each medicinal species. Most of the useful books on medicinal plants have only basic drawings or traditional academic-style photographs.

In addition, I am beginning to raise several local medicinal plants, such as chipilín (*Crotalaria longirostrata*), which I drink as a soup or

tea about 30 minutes before bedtime. It provides a calming, relaxing effect, and I sleep soundly. But as any plant product, we ourselves do not prescribe or recommend it to anyone without professional medical consultations because most plants have a multitude of diverse chemicals. The roots, bark, stems and flowers each have different chemicals and should only be used after appropriate medical consultation. But precisely because of the diversity of chemicals in each plant (and the thousands of plant species in the multitude of totally different eco-systems in Guatemala), there is significant potential for modern medicine.

Thus it is beneficial to move forward to learn more about medicinal plants, and to support product development together with capable Guatemalan botanists with experience in medicinal plants. 📖



Tagetes lucida pericón



Tobacco flower

REVUE

Guatemala's English-language Magazine

www.REVUE.gt • consultas@revuemag.com

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www.ClubFotograficoAntigua.com

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Revue Webmaster: Rudy A. Girón

Printed by: PRINT STUDIO

Publishing Company: SAN JOAQUÍN PRODUCCIONES, S.A.

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3a avenida sur #4-A (Central Office)

TEL: (502) 7931-4500

publicidad@revuemag.com

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Opinions or statements printed in the REVUE are not necessarily those of the publishers. We welcome your comments.

40,000 readers monthly

PRINT / ONLINE

REVUE is distributed free, and available at:

Hotels, Restaurants, Travel Agencies, Car Rental Agencies,

Embassies, Spanish Schools, INGUAT offices, Shops,

and other public places in the following areas:

Guatemala City, La Antigua, Quetzaltenango, Lake Atitlán,

Cobán, Petén, Río Dulce, Livingston, Monterrico, Retalhuleu;

as well as locations in El Salvador and Honduras.

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PRINT - MOBILE - ONLINE

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