

Devil's Claw: Cultivating with a conscience

You may know the herbal remedy but do you know how it's made?

Herbal medicine is becoming increasingly popular, but some herbs can become victims of their own success. Our demand for them means careful and sustainable cultivation is necessary to protect the survival, and quality, of some medicinal plants.

Unsustainable exploitation of wild herbs is now said to be threatening populations of remedies such as goldenseal, echinacea, American ginseng and black cohosh among others.

The answer is sustainable, managed cultivation, but this isn't easy; it requires experimentation, planning, time and investment.

In the 1950s Alfred Vogel, a Swiss naturopath, came across the herb *Harpagophytum*, commonly known as Devil's Claw, being harvested by the Ovampo people in the Kalahari Desert in South Africa.

He was struck by the beauty of the trumpet-like flower produced by the plant. But underneath the surface of the desert is the mother tuber and the deep-lying secondary tubers used to store water to enable the plant to survive desert conditions. It is these secondary tubers of Devil's Claw that Vogel discovered are valued for their medicinal qualities and used for rheumatic, joint and muscular aches and pains.

Vogel started a company to cultivate herbs and produce fresh tinctures in the fertile region of Roggwil, Switzerland, and later, when the threat to Devil's Claw became apparent in the 1990s, the company began researching sustainable growing methods.



The popularity of Devil's Claw meant it was being harvested in the wild to such an extent that in one year alone 15 million plants were dug up for export.

The indigenous people, displaced from their lands by diamond miners, were and still are paid very poorly by merchants for the Devil's Claw tubers, incentivizing them to take as much as possible from each plant, rather than harvesting a few secondary tubers and leaving the mother tuber to re-grow.

The issue was not only a matter of possible extinction, however, but also of quality, as Devil's Claw was typically being harvested in such a way that there was no guarantee that the secondary tubers, with the medicinal properties, were being used.

The company AVogel, along with a professor from Munich university and some

local farmers, set up a special farm in the Kalahari Desert to cultivate Devil's Claw, so it didn't have to be harvested from the wild for the tincture which goes into Atrosan Devil's Claw tablets.

Since that time, the plants have been grown according to an organic protocol, with the roots being harvested by hand every four years. That's the time it takes for the tubers to grow back sufficiently. After harvesting, the mother plant is carefully replanted and not harvested for another four years.

Herbal medicine companies have a responsibility to ensure the herbs they use are sustainably collected, and we consumers have a responsibility to be more aware of where the herbs we buy come from – if the survival as well as the quality of many medicinal plants are not to be threatened by our demand for them.