Lotus: Food For the Body
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AYURVEDA

Lotus: Food For the Body

Good nourishment and medicine lurk beneath those pretty petals

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Besides its sanctity and beauty, the lotus is extensively used as both food and medicine in India. In fact, five thousand years ago verses of the Rig Veda extolled the lotus for its food value in the first literary reference to the flower. Almost every part is edible. Fresh rhizomes or root stock are consumed as a vegetable, either roasted or in curry. Dried rhizome slices are made into curry or fried chips; they are also frozen and pickled. The immature seed pod is often sold for the edible parts embedded in it. Shelled seeds are sweetly delicious and eaten raw, roasted, boiled, candied or ground into flour. The tender leaves, stalks and flowers are also eaten as vegetables, even fed to animals.

Old Indian references are indicative of powerful medicinal properties of the lotus against a number of human ailments involving the digestive, reproductive, circulatory and excretory systems. The rhizomes of the white-flowered variety are credited with restoring and rejuvenating health. In Ayurveda the panchang (5 parts of the plant--rhizomes, leaves, flowers,

stamens and seeds) of lotus have been prescribed for rejuvenation, longevity and fertility.

The large leaves are used as cool bedsheets in high fever with heat and burning of skin. The flowers are used in diarrhea, cholera, fever and diseases of liver and also recommended as a cardiotonic.

The milky, viscid juice of leaves is useful medicine for diarrhea, sun stroke and vertigo. Lotus flowers are decocted for abdominal cramps, blood discharges, metrorrhagia and nonexpulsion of the amniotic sac at the time of childbirth. A syrup of dried flowers in doses of 200ml is found to be efficacious in curing mild dysentery. The dried pink-red petals of flowers are used as a cosmetic application on the face to improve the complexion. Perfume is also extracted from the flowers.

The stamens are astringent and cooling, useful in relieving any burning sensations of the body, bleeding piles and menstrual problems. For bleeding piles, they are administered with honey and fresh butter or sugar. The carefully dried, yellow, fragrant stamens are astringent and valued as a diuretic remedy and also for cosmetic purposes. They are reported to purify heart, permeate kidneys, add virility, blacken the hair and check spermatorrhea.

The seeds are used to relieve vomiting and are given to children as a diuretic and refrigerant. They are used as a cardiotonic and form a cooling medicine for cutaneous

diseases and leprosy and are an antidote for poison. The seeds are regarded as a general tonic and considered as nourishing and extremely good for preserving general health and strength and promoting blood circulation and virility.

Is the Lotus in Peril?

During the last five decades, India's aquatic bodies and wetlands have rapidly deteriorated due to urbanization, invasion of weeds and pollution. As a result of this destruction and reduction of its natural habitat, the population of sacred lotuses is shrinking rapidly.

Considering the loss of plant diversity and the immense religious, economic, medicinal and ornamental potentialities of lotus among the aquatic plant species, the National Botanical Research Institute has taken up a project to aid in its preservation. The germplasm of 35 Indian varieties as well as 25 more from Japan, Thailand, UK, Germany, USA and Australia have been collected for preservation. All seeds have been successfully grown in our conditions at Lucknow, and the resulting information distributed to over 100 organizations, institutions, connoisseurs and progressive farmers from within and outside the country for ex-situ conservation and rehabilitation and to generate the lotus culture among the masses.

Dr. Goel is assistant director in the Botanic Garden at NBRI, Lucknow. He has been instrumental in programs to save endangered Indian plant species from extinction. He has taken special interest in the lotus, which has been an integral part of Hindu culture from ancient times.

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