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Yolloxóchitl

THE FLOWER OF THE HEART

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It is common knowledge that the ancient Nahuas had a profound knowledge of the flora and fauna native to their area. This allowed them to make daily use of many products derived from different animal and plant species and to develop medical practices based on these products' therapeutic value.

Different sixteenth century sources testify to the extensive variety of remedies used by ancient Mexican doctors that included different plant and animal species. In addition, anthropological studies have proven that many of these plants continue to be used by the public today.

One such plant is *yolloxóchitl*, which in Nahuatl means "flower of the heart," and is known today as *Talauma mexicana*, of the magnoliaceous genus.¹ The *yolloxóchitl* is mentioned in several sources which describe its uses: for example, in the *Libellus de Medicinalibus Indorum Herbis*, also known as the *De la Cruz-Badiano Codex*. It should be noted that this text is not actually a codex, but a manuscript describing remedies used to treat all kinds of ills, written by a Tlatelolca indigenous doctor named Martín de la Cruz and translated by a Xochimilca Indian named Juan Badiano.

In the *Libellus*, Martín de la Cruz describes *yolloxóchitl* prepared as a drink to unblock the urinary tract and to alle-



violate difficult urination. He also prescribed it for "Abderus' brain fever," a mental disease known in Europe from the time of the Greeks. He also recommended it as an amulet for travelers.²

The royal physician Francisco Hernández studied the botanical and zoological diversity of the recently conquered lands. In his book *Historia Natural de la Nueva España* (Natural History of New Spain), he describes 3,000 different species of plants and says the following about *yolloxóchitl*: "mixed with *cacaoatl* or with its husks, it strengthens the heart, the stomach and constipates the bowels. Its marrow, cooked with *mecaxóchitl*, *mexóchitl*, *xochinacatzli*, *tlixóchitl*, *collapahitli* and *cola de tlacuatzin*, and introduced into the uterus cures sterility."³

Other texts recommend *yolloxóchitl* for chills and fever, and, since it is aromatic, it was considered useful as a perfume. Traditional wisdom dictates that it strengthens the heart and is an astringent and antispasmodic.

It is worth noting that the form of the plant's flower is probably the reason the Mexicas named it *yolloxóchitl*, since it bears a great resemblance to ancient Nahuatl artistic renderings of the heart. Today, in tribute to its importance, the *yolloxóchitl*, or flower of the heart, forms part of the coat of arms of Mexico's National Cardiology Institute, founded more than 40 years ago by Dr. Ignacio Chávez. ❧

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The illustrations for this article are taken from the *De la Cruz-Badiano Codex*.

¹ José Luis Díaz, *Índice y sinonimia de las plantas medicinales mexicanas*, IMEPLAN, Mexico City, 1976, p. 203.

² Martín de la Cruz, *Libellus de Medicinalibus Indorum Herbis*, facsimile edition, IMSS, Mexico City, 1979, fols. 34r, 34v, 53v and 56v.

³ Francisco Hernández, *Historia Natural de la Nueva España*, UNAM, Mexico City, 1959, Book II, Chapter XVIII.