

# The Santo Domingo Cultural Center's Historical Ethnobotanical Garden

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Since antiquity, plants have been of interest in Oaxaca, which boasts Mexico's most diverse flora. Specialists estimate that the state is host to from 10,000 to 15,000 different plant species. As a point of comparison, all of Europe holds 12,000 species. Oaxaca's botanical personality is also very well defined by its high proportion of endemic genera and species, plants which grow nowhere else under natural conditions. The state's high number of endemic flora and fauna is a reflection of its long, complex geological history. If Mexico is one of the world's most biologically diverse countries, this area in particular has operated as an evolutionary laboratory, one of the planet's "ovens of creation."

The indigenous and mixed ancestry societies of Oaxaca have developed in the framework of this diversity. *Lula'* (in Zapotec), *Nunduva* (in Mixtec) and *Huaxácac* (in Nahuatl) are different names native to Oaxaca for a very useful tree, the *guaje* (*Leucaena esculenta*), a kind of acacia.<sup>1</sup>

The inhabitants of this heterogeneous, ecologically diverse region learned to deal with a great many plant and ani-

mal species. Archeological evidence points to groups of human beings genetically manipulating several species native to the state for about 10,000 years. In fact, the Western Hemisphere's oldest known vestiges of plant domestication are a few squash seeds found in a cave near Mitla dating from 8,000 years before Christ.

To Oaxaca's natural floristic diversity must be added, then, the genetic diversity that has resulted from careful selection by hundreds of generations of its inhabitants. In addition to keeping an enormous genetic stock alive and evolving in traditional crops, the peoples of Oaxaca possess an extraordinarily rich floristic legacy and an indigenous botany, in some cases just as endangered as the ecosystems they are based on, that has only recently begun to be valued and studied. When indigenous languages and the cultural identity of entire peoples disappear, their vernacular science also dies. This is why documenting and disseminating the botanical knowledge of the cultures of Oaxaca is an urgent need.

The Historical Ethnobotanical Garden was born in the Santo Domingo Cultural Center to do this. Its creation was promoted from 1993 on by Pro-Oax, a civic organization headed by painter Francisco Toledo. With support from the state government, the National Institute of Anthro-

pology and History and Fomento Social Banamex, the garden began to be planted in July 1998. Of the 2.3 hectares that it will eventually occupy, today we have almost one hectare planted with species of Oaxaca's arid ecosystems, including agaves, cacti, yuccas and copal trees, among others. Still pending are species that represent the state's other ecological and cultural regions.

Guided tours of the garden are available for school groups and the general public. It also has a nursery, a herbarium, a library and a lecture/seminar hall. Showing the living links between Oaxaca's biological and ethnic diversity, the Ethnobotanical Garden complements and enriches the Oaxaca Cultures Museum and the Friar Francisco de Burgoa Library. The garden's research, conservation and dissemination projects are also linked to those of Oaxaca's museums. This relationship between a botanical garden and a cultural center is unique in Mexico. ■■■

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> As Manuel Esparza points out, the *guaje* was decisive for the survival of nomads who roamed what is now Oaxaca thousands of years ago: they used its gourds to carry the water they needed to travel long distances. Manuel Esparza, "Doce milenios de historia," *Hechizo de Oaxaca* (Monterrey, Nuevo León: Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey-Patria, 1991), p. 19. [Editor's Note.]

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