

Ethnobotany in the New Europe

People, Health and Wild Plant Resources

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CHAPTER 9

The Ecology and Use of Edible Thistles in Évora, Alentejo, Southeastern Portugal

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Introduction

The Alentejo region in South Portugal lies between the Tagus River and Algarve, representing about one third of the area and only five per cent of the population of Portugal. It is a semiarid region of undulating plains with a Mediterranean climate softened by the mild Atlantic sea breezes, with mild winters and hot, dry summers. With a long history of scarcity and poverty, it shows very particular cultural traits that made Feio (1983) call it 'a country within a country'. Among its defining traits is a unique culinary tradition, generally considered a consequence of necessity, with a high use of bread-based dishes and wild plants, such as wild thistles.

This chapter describes the results of a small ethnobotanical research project conducted in the region surrounding the city of Évora, in the central part of Alentejo. The objective of our study was to gain an initial understanding of the use of wild thistles as food in a small area near the city of Évora where thistles are commonly consumed and also traded in the more traditional markets. We interviewed a small sample of gatherers and sellers of thistles, visited and described the sites where they collect and observed the procedures followed in the harvest and use of thistles. Given that several thistles occur in the area, one of our main goals was to identify which species were in fact used by the local population. Thistles are valued for their high mineral content, and it could be expected that the nutritional quality would vary across the collecting range according to

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