

The tree of life

The recognition of the argan tree and argan oil as an important part of Moroccan culture and productivity brings hope to both local communities and consumers. Juliet Roberts taps into this latest of elixirs to draw our attention. Photographs Clay Perry

SEEING GOATS PERCHED HIGH UP A TREE is not an uncommon sight in southwest Morocco. While the semi-desert forest floor in the Souss region may offer little in the way of sustenance, the branches of the trees are laden with the argan trees' large oval fruit: a chewy delicacy for goats and an important natural resource for the local community. The Berbers have relied upon the argan tree for food, timber and medicine for centuries, yet until recently, little was known outside of their community about the unique qualities of argan oil.

Berber women use the oil derived from the trees' fruit in food and traditional medicines, as well as applying it to their skin, hair and nails. The oil is rich in anti-oxidants and has twice as much vitamin E as olive oil. It contains eight essential fatty acids, including omega 6, as well as unique plant sterols, which have anti-inflammatory properties. Argan oil is believed to help lower cholesterol, stimulate circulation and strengthen the body's natural defences. It is particularly good for skin conditions, such as eczema and psoriasis, and helps reduce wrinkles, stretch marks and scarring.

Argan trees grow exclusively in the southwest of Morocco, but sadly the degradation of the area (due to over grazing, forest clearance for farming, the unregulated collection of firewood and the lack of commercial propagation) has meant the groves have been reduced to a mere 860,000 hectares. The ecological

importance of this rare and endangered tree was underlined in 1999 with UNESCO declaring the argan forest a Biosphere Reserve.

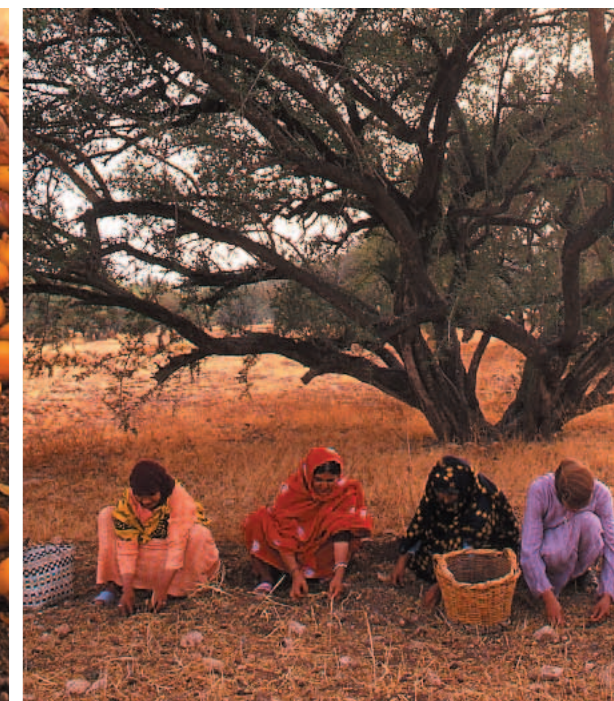
For the past six years Ruth Hajioff, a Chinese herbalist and acupuncturist, has been dedicated to raising the awareness of argan oil. "I met a highly regarded herbalist while on holiday in Morocco and became interested in the medicinal properties of argan, but it really all took off some months later at a meeting with Dr Mark Nesbitt at the Centre of Economic Botany at Kew. He told me that there was grave concern for the future of these trees and proposed I should consider setting up a UK market to sell the oil. I'd never run a business before, but I became obsessed with argan and before I knew it I was downloading food regulations and sourcing bottles."

Ruth began experimenting with argan oil, blending it with different essential oils, such as lavender, rose and neroli, to create a range of skincare products. She set up her own production unit four years ago in the heart of Morocco's argan region, importing a state-of-the-art cold-press from Germany and employing local Berber women. "Providing a fair income for the local community who are producing the oil encourages the protection of the tree and gives hope that future generations will be able to support themselves from their unique heritage."

Argania spinosa (known locally as 'the tree of life') is the only member of the *Sapotaceae* family occurring north of the Sahara



LEFT: Agile goats nibble the ripe fruits from the branches of the argan tree.
L-R: Olive-shaped fruits litter the ground. Local women collect the shrivelled fruits in late summer.



ARGAN OIL

“Providing a fair income for the local community who are producing the oil encourages the protection of the tree and gives hope that future generations will be able to support themselves from their unique heritage”

and the single species of the genus *Argania*. It is thought that the trees date back to the Tertiary period between 65 and 1.6 million years ago, and at one time grew all over North Africa and southern Europe. An evergreen shrub or tree, it can grow up to 10m from a single gnarled and twisted trunk or multiple stems. Its branches carry vicious spines, which prove an effective deterrent to all (apart from the fearless goats) wishing to harvest the fruit.

Argan trees are believed to live to at least 250 years old, and although they start producing fruit after about five years, it takes 50-60 years before they are in full production. They can manage on as little as 15mm of water per year, however, in times of extreme drought the trees may become dormant, regenerating only once the rains return. To survive the semi-arid conditions the trees sink their roots deep below the surface into the water table 30m down. Unsurprisingly, little else will grow nearby as the trees are renowned for taking up all water available.

The argan flowers in the spring, producing fleshy green fruit (not dissimilar to a large, round olive) that turn yellow as they mature. In late summer, shrivelled and brown, they fall from the tree to be hand gathered into baskets by local women.

“There’s a myth that the argan nuts have to pass through the goat’s gut before they are collected out of their dung,” says Ruth.

“Some fruit are harvested that way but it does taint the oil with the unmistakable smell of goat.”

The process of producing the oil is labour intensive. First the women peel off the outer fruit (pericarp) to reveal the inner nut, which resembles an elongated reddish brown marble. The nut has an extremely hard shell, which the women carefully crack open by hand using a stone and anvil to release the inner almond-shaped kernel. “There’s generally one kernel per nut,” explains Ruth, “but you can find up to three small kernels.” It can take 10-12 hours to crack the 3kg of kernels needed to produce 1 litre of oil,” says Ruth. For culinary oil, the kernels are lightly toasted prior to pressing.

The resultant amber-coloured oil has a rich, nutty flavour that works well drizzled over grilled fish, roasted vegetables or salads. Ruth also uses it on porridge together with honey and thick yoghurt. The thick chocolate-coloured residue left over after extraction of the oil – called *amlou* – is sweetened with honey and served as a breakfast-time treat.

The argan tree is a model of efficiency: its timber is used in buildings and furniture making as the wood is both of excellent quality and highly resistant to insects; the nutshells and wood are used to fuel fires; the leaves and discarded fruit are fed to goats, camels and sheep; the pressed cake left over from the oil extraction is used as cattle fodder. “It makes the meat taste amazing,” says Ruth. Finally, the second pressing is used for lamp fuel.

Earlier this year, the High Commissioner of Water and Forests pledged to fund the planting of 1050 hectares of argan, with a further 350 hectares to be financed by other local institutions and NGOs. Animals are not allowed to graze in the groves for three months prior to harvest, so while the sight of goats in trees may become increasingly rare, it is hoped the argan groves will once more clothe the land, providing greater subsistence for the Berbers and the ecology that co-exist in the shade cast by their canopy. ■

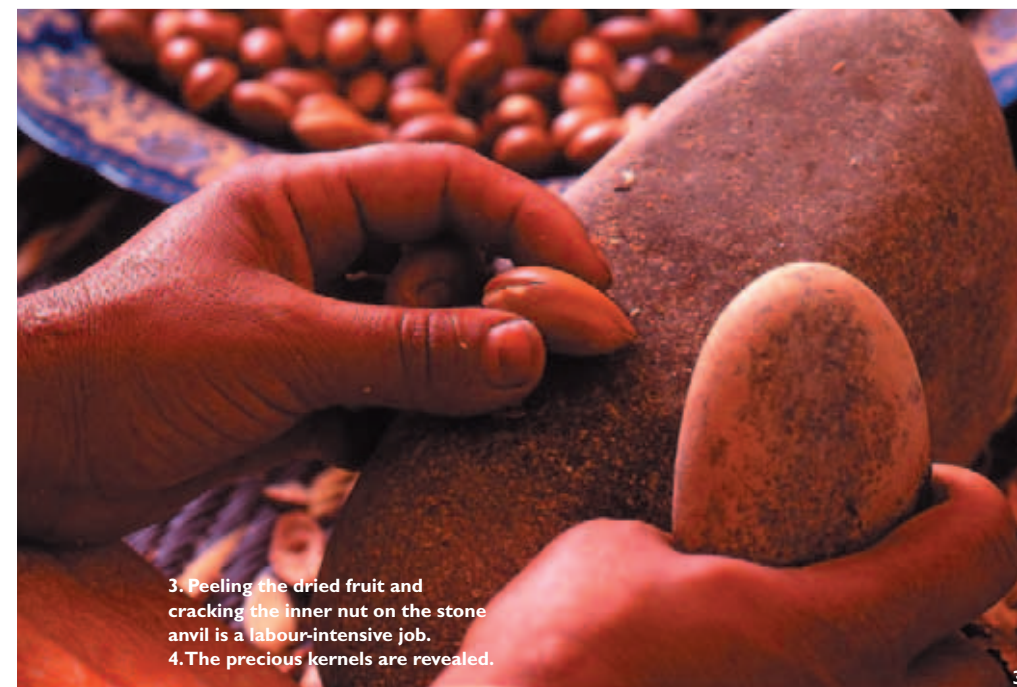
Further information

• There is an argan tree in the temperate house at Kew.
Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, Richmond, Surrey TW9 3AB.
Tel 020 8332 5655; www.rbgekew.org.uk

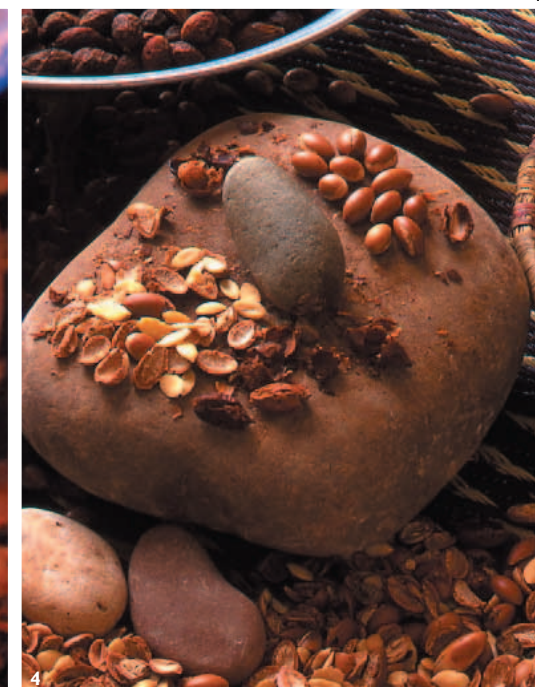
• Ruth Hajioff’s company is Wild Wood Groves, PO Box 33146,
London NW3 7FS. Tel 020 8458 2738, info@wildwoodgroves.com,
www.wildwoodgroves.com



1. The shrivelled brown fruits, ready to process. 2. Oil production has provided a valuable industry for the local community.



3. Peeling the dried fruit and cracking the inner nut on the stone anvil is a labour-intensive job. 4. The precious kernels are revealed.



5. If used for culinary purposes, kernels are lightly toasted before pressing. 6. A local Berber woman works at a grindstone to produce oil from the kernels, and the residual sweet paste, *amlou*.



Ruth Hajioff, dedicated to promoting the values of argan oil.