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£3.25 Issue 26
December 2007

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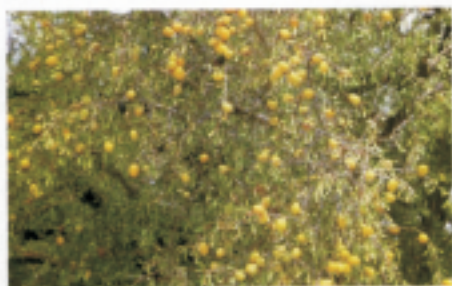
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SAVING THE SACRED ARGAN

A holiday to Morocco, an introduction to a renowned North African herbalist and Ruth Hajjoff found herself on a remarkable quest, as Margy Cockburn discovered



Looking at my distinctive golden bottle of argan oil, I can't decide whether to sprinkle it on to my tomato salad or wear some. I do both. My salad is transformed by the smokily-nutty taste of this 80% unsaturated oil.

It's nutritious too, containing twice as much vitamin E as olive oil plus eight other essential fatty acids. It's also reported to help lower cholesterol, to be anti-inflammatory and possess powerful aphrodisiac properties (a rumour supported by the fathering ability of Moroccan nonogenarians!).

My hands, recently traumatised by some serious gardening, practically sigh with relief as I massage in the oil. Argan oil also contains saponins, known for their skin-softening properties, and is a moisturiser and wrinkle-buster which has been used by Berber women for centuries to nourish and protect their hair, skin and nails.

THREATENED RESOURCE

For the Berber people, the argan tree (*Argania spinosa*) is infinitely more than a cosmetic resource – Berber women rely on it for their livelihood. Sadly, the tree is now threatened.

Once covering North Africa, it's now only found growing wild in the semi-desert soil of south-west Morocco. It also helps to hold back the northern advance of the Saharan desert and plays a key part in protecting the local people and their way of life.

No wonder Ruth Hajioff was intrigued.

"After 27 years of marriage and three children I found myself divorced and looking for a new direction in life. I'd suffered from glandular fever and had been helped by Traditional Chinese Medicine, which started my interest in alternative remedies. I trained to become a herbalist and acupuncturist so I could help others in turn.

"I'd visited Morocco a number of times and fallen in love with the simplicity of the place and the hospitality of its people. And then I was introduced to a herbalist who invited me to stay with him and his family. Every morning for breakfast we would dip bread into



argan oil and amlou (a paste made with argan oil and crushed organic almonds and honey), and he told me about the health benefits of argan and how it's regularly prescribed to protect the heart, liver and gall bladder. I was determined to find out more and went to the botanical centre at Kew to do some research.

"That involved four months of wading through everything that had been written about this ancient tree – none of it in English! I realised just how

Above: Ruth Hajioff with renowned Moroccan herbalist 'Haj' Akouchar, who first introduced her to the benefits of argan oil.

Opposite page: argan oil production is a refreshingly unmechanised system - the photos show the ancient trees, women collecting the fruit, and the nut grinding process

"By using argan oil you can be looking after yourself at the same time as you are looking after the world"

Ruth Hajioff, Wild Wood Groves

endangered the tree was, how full of amazing ingredients and how much the Berber women, who do the work of harvesting and producing the oil, depend on it.

"It's really time-consuming to produce: the fruit is stripped from the nuts which are then cracked individually ►



◀ between two stones to reveal a small kernel. This kernel is then toasted and ground to a paste, which is kneaded to produce a small amount of oil.

"It takes about two days work and 3kg kernels to produce a single litre of oil. And nothing is wasted – the nut shells are used as kindling and the fruit and the paste that are left are made into patties for cattle food."

STEELY DETERMINATION

Ruth, whose small frame and youthful face (proof of the cosmetic properties of the oil!) hide a steely determination, admits she has something of an obsession about preserving the sacred Argan tree. She has set about creating an industry to help preserve the tree and improve conditions for the women.

Working with local expert Moulay Daoui, Ruth has brought water and electricity to the heart of the Argan region (20 minutes drive east of Agadir) and set up an ethical trade centre that employs local women who, in the absence of state funded welfare for ill-health and unemployment, are particularly vulnerable.

Ruth has also set up the UK importing operation Wild Wood Groves.

Her London base is now full of the heady scents of essential oils that Ruth adds to the cold-pressed argan to create her range of skin care products.

Ruth sells the oils (as well as amlou and saffron) through her website and various select outlets, including a stall in London's Borough Market – the foodie heaven whose selection panel was so impressed with the oil that Ruth managed to leapfrog a long waiting list.

Last year her argan food oil won a coveted Gold Award for Taste and to top it all, the encouraging news is that this year, for the first time in decades, the decline of the argan tree (now under UNESCO protection) has stabilised.

Ruth's work has been recognised by her election to the Foundation for the Preservation and Research for the Argan, set up by Moroccan King Mohammed VI, and her eventual aim is to set up an eco-tourism attraction and sponsor literacy training and child-care for the employee-stakeholders.

"Long-term thinking is a luxury for people who are reasonably well off, so I want to help the Berber women to see what a treasure they have and to make sure they benefit from it." ■

www.wildwoodgroves.com

Berber women are seen here collecting the fruits that have ripened and fallen from the argan trees. The pulp is removed, the hard nut cracked and the seeds extracted to grind into the precious paste and oil. The trees' gnarled and twisted trunks and branches are easy for goats to climb (see page 58), but this is discouraged as they can quickly devour a crop

"I want to help the Berber women to see what a treasure they have and to make sure they benefit from it"

Ruth Hajioff