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Flora Grown and Traded in Panama City, in the 16th Century and Nowadays

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Abstract

Panama City is located in the Pacific coast of the isthmus that united North and South America somewhere between 15 and 3 million years ago. The capital city of Panama is a tropical modern urban centre that registers about 1,750 mm of rain per year, which favours the growth of food, medicinal herbs, fruit trees and ornamental species in gardens and pots. In early 2017, the University of Lisbon conducted a scientific mission to Panama to survey the local flora, in order to compare this flora with the plant species mentioned in the 16th century manuscript of Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo (1526), following a long time project initiated in Brazil in 1997 by the Portuguese Tropical Research Institute. The main objective of the research was to assess the availability of local food, spice and medicines in the early years of European colonisation and to evaluate the contribution of the Portuguese and the Spanish peoples to the evolution of flora consumption and therapeutic application. The current survey included two categories of informants: i) three (3) gardeners devoted to food and medicines cultivation inside the urban area; ii) forty-seven (47) formal and informal traders found in markets, supermarkets, or pharmacies. The results showed that 171 different plant species are offered to the public today against 55 mentioned by the chronicles in early colonisation days. More than half of the species have medicinal uses in our days and about one third are consumed as food. The final research aim is to build a database that permits to study the evolution of Latin American flora and their uses throughout times.

Keywords: Flora, food, Latin America, medicines, Panama, spices