Madhunashini - The Sweet Killer

NM Ganesh Babu

With its fast industrialization and rapid progress on all fronts, India is making big strides towards global recognition. However the flip side is that the buying capacity and modern way of life is resulting in an increase in the lifestyle related diseases. Home to nearly millions of diabetics today, India is fast becoming the diabetic capital of the world. Regular exercises and controlled diet coupled with intake of easily available herbal medicines help to a great extent in controlling blood sugar level.

One such important herb is Gymnema sylvestre or Madhunashini - literally the destroyer of sweet.

Madhunashini belonging to the family Asclepiadaceae, is a climbing herb. Apart from the main usage for diabetes, it is also reported to be useful in cough, asthma, intermittent fever, dyspepsia, constipation, jaundice, cardiopathy and amenorrhoea. The incredible property of the plant is expressed when its leaves are chewed; they paralyze or inactivate the taste buds and one is unable to sense the sweet taste temporarily or for a short while. Hence, it is known as “destroyer of sugar” in most of Indian languages.

How does it look like?

Madhunashini is a woody twiner that usually climbs on bushes and trees. This can grow vertically up to 10 m tall. All parts of this twiner exude milky sap when injured. Leaves are arranged opposite on the stem and appear minutely hairy and soft when touched. Inflorescences arise in the axils of leaves. Flowers are small yellowish-green borne as small clusters. Fruits usually are paired like moustache, measure up to 8 cm long and 1 cm broad, tapering towards apex with blunt tip. Seeds are many, dark brown, compressed, papery along margins, with white, silky hair. These silky hairs attached to the top of the seeds help in their dispersal.

Where is it found?

The natural habitats are hedges along streamlets, wayside thickets and scrub forests. In India it is found wild in drier parts of the central and peninsular zone. Profuse flowering can be seen during July to September.

Ayurvedic Properties and Uses

The parts used are leaves for fever and diabetes and seeds and root bark for cough. It is astringent and bitter in taste, light and dry in quality, hot in potency, has a pungent post digestive effect and it pacifies the vitiation of Kapha and Vata. It is used in instances of snake poisoning, constipation, jaundice, intermittent fever, diabetes and dysuria.

How to grow it in your garden?

This demure twiner grows both in sunny and shady settings. Growing this as an indoor plant may be a difficult task. This can be allowed to twine on wrought iron support, a fence, or any types of structures that can add style and beauty to your garden. Well-designed trellis affixed on the wall can provide an aesthetic look for this lush-green foliage twiner. Madhunashini can also be planted in pot
of over 14 inches. This potted plant can be trained vertically by providing suitable support like iron rods or bamboo sticks. Hanging pots can also have this twiner, where many branchlets beautifully droop down. Potting mixture should be composite of 2 folds loamy soil, 1 fold of sand and 3 folds of farmyard manure or vermicompost.

Watering should be regular at least once a day in case of potted plants. Once it is planted directly in soil, regular watering is needed only up to its establishment, may be for a period of 4 months. Once it starts flowering, watering can be done once a week. This twiner does not need any periodical pruning as it behaves well.

Madhunashini is propagated through seeds as well as by stem cuttings. Seeds are reported to have short-viability. Seeds are sown in flat or raised beds during November-January. Sowing should not be more than 1” deep. It starts germinating within 15 days. The 3-month-old seedlings are transplanted in containers or into the field. In case of cuttings, matured pencil-thick stems are selected. Each stem cutting should bear 4-5 nodes and planted in such a way that underground portion as well the aerial portion should have 2 nodes each. Soil medium should have more proportion of coarse sand. After planting, the bed is covered with polythene cover to create humidity that enhances root initiation. Sprouting starts within 15 days, root initiation starts after 50 days. 4 to 5-month-old cuttings are transplanted in containers or into the field.

During the severe incidence of pests, the mechanical, cultural and biological control methods are to be adopted. Since the plants are used for medicinal purpose, use of synthetic pesticide is to be avoided. The chemical pesticide residues in the produce may cause deleterious effects. Azadirachtin based neem formulations are best suited as pesticides for this species.

What are the Vernacular names?

In English it is called as Periploca of the woods, Meshasringi in Sanskrit, Gudmar, Meshasringi in Hindi, Cirkurinecan in Tamil, Sakkarakkolli, Madhunashini in Malayalam and Madhusashini in Kannada.

Madhunashini Self Help Recipes

For Diabetes
- Dry the Madhunashini leaves in shade and pound to make powder. Take 1 teaspoon of the powder with warm water after food thrice a day for controlling blood sugar.
- Just chewing the leaves is also beneficial in case of diabetes.
- Grind the leaves into a paste and external application is done in case of swelling/ wounds/ ulcers in diabetes.

For Cough
- Take some fresh Madhunashini leaves and wash. Mix one part of leaves with four parts of water and boil to reduce it to 1/4th the original quantity. Filter and use. Take half a cup of this decoction twice a day on empty stomach early in the morning and evening for dry cough.
- Dry the Madhunashini seeds and pound to make powder. Take half teaspoon of the powder with warm water in phlegmatic conditions.
- The root bark is collected and dried. This is burnt and the fumes inhaled. The treatment is effective in phlegmatic conditions. It can be done at the end of sneezing. Take a few red hot ambers on a metal plate. Drop the root bark pieces on to the ambers. Keep the plate at a distance and direct the fumes towards you. Sit straight with calm mind taking deep inspirations and expirations. Inhale the smoke through one nostril. Emit the smoke only through the mouth. Inhale from both the nostrils taking turns. Relax for 15 minutes. Do not wash immediately. Spit out the phlegm. Avoid inhalation in running nose condition.

Dr Ganesh Babu N.M. is the Sr. Research Officer at CHG, IIST University, Bangalore, email: ganesh.babu@frlht.org