

Abstract

Background: The use of traditional medicines in Kenya accounts for more than 70% or more of basic health-care treatments. Documentation of herbal plants is necessary because they are becoming more important, especially due to escalating costs of drugs and the focus on organic products in most developing countries. More so, with the development of resistance of pathogens to drugs, ethno-veterinary and ethno-human medicine might be the route to take since herbs tend to be broad spectrum in use. The aim of this study was to document traditional knowledge on ethnobotanical uses of medicinal plants in Kitui County.

Method: Data was collected through semi-structured open-ended questionnaires administered to 68 households in the study area. Simple random sampling was used to select households who were the final sampling units.

Results: Majority of the respondents (51.5%) had attended school up to primary level. Only about 6% of respondents were engaged as full-time herbalists whereas 90% had acquired traditional knowledge through informal trainings. A total of 62% of the informants acquired traditional herbal knowledge through apprenticeship from relatives with 29.4% of respondents taking between six months to one year to learn. A total of 42 plant species in 25 families were used in treating one or more disease conditions. *Aloe secundiflora* locally known as Kiluma was the most common medicinal plant, mentioned by 71% of the respondents. Other commonly used plants were *Acacia nilotica*, *Zanthoxylum chalybeum* and *Azadirachta indica*. Plucking of leaves (45.0%), digging of roots (31.4%) and debarking (11.6%) were the most commonly used methods of harvesting medicinal plants. The most commonly used plant parts were leaves (42%), stem bark (31%) and roots (21%). *Acacia tortilis* and *Terminalia brownii* were the most commonly used in the category of non-medicinal plant uses with 30% and 25% use frequencies respectively. The most common non-medicinal plant uses in the area were firewood, charcoal and animal feed.

Conclusion: The study provides crucial ethnopharmacological lead towards discovery of natural drugs for treatment of both human and livestock diseases in Kitui County. The study provides platform for conservation of the documented plant resources based on their vulnerability to over-exploitation.