

Mini series

## Facts about dry land vegetation <Part 6>

### Za'atar

This series has been on hold for some time, but this today as part 6, I would like to introduce za'atar which is a very familiar herb in the Middle East. Za'atar is Arabic and in English it is thyme, one of the most famous herbs. It is the thyme which appears in Simon and Garfunkel's song Scarborough Fair - parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme. Za'atar is a wild thyme and has a similar smell to oregano. In Palestine, they use za'atar for both thyme as well as for the herb salt which is made by mixing the dried herb with sesame, sumac, lemon grass and salt. Sumac is the dried and powdered seeds of a plant in the *Anacardiaceae*. It is a very commonly used spice in the Middle East and is used on varieties of occasions. It is sprinkled over hummus and muttabal which I introduced in part 4 of this series, and also over vegetable salads. In the Middle East, one is served za'atar, and zahrat which is a herb tea which means 'flower' in Arabic with the main ingredient being lemon balm. Yellowish brown tea is za'atar and more vivid yellow is zahrat.

I first encountered za'atar was when I was invited to breakfast at my Palestinian friend's house in UAE while I was working there. As usual, Arabian bread called khubz is served on the table first. Then the herb salt (za'atar) and olive oil appear. Tearing bread, dipping in olive oil and then dipping in za'atar and eating is rather good and one does not get tired of it and therefore one tends to overeat. It is a typical breakfast in Palestine.



Za'atar is on the bottom left

I often encountered za'atar in Syria, too. What I often ate was a baked bread with olive oil and za'atar on it. As seen in the photo, people add cheese to it too. In Palestine, people knead cheese and za'atar in bread dough. This is called zybune za'atar. Zybune means 'cheese' in Arabic. Therefore, zybune za'atar means cheese thyme. It is simple but very delicious. My lunch in the Middle East is usually zybune za'atar. In Aleppo markets, za'atar is displayed in various patterns. Mountains of soaps and the za'atar patterns make me realize that I am in a souk in Aleppo.



Zybune za'atar



Patterns seen in souks in Aleppo

The agricultural extension project in the Jordan River Rift Valley, which I was involved with in Palestine until recently, there was an effort to promote za'atar cultivation. Za'atar is hardy and is not very difficult to cultivate. It is a perennial crop and once it is planted there is not much one has to do. Therefore, it is suitable for small scale cultivation like family vegetable gardens tended by village women. It is also easy to add value by drying and processing after harvesting. This makes the crop extremely compatible with the objectives of gender focused agricultural projects that aim to add value to agricultural products. In the project, we introduced za'atar dealers to women's cooperatives and started trial cultivation. We hope this will lead to vitalization of women's cooperatives' activities.



Trial cultivation by women's cooperative and za'atar grown