

Mapping the nation's 'fascinating mosaic' of flora

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Despite occupying 0.007 percent of the world's surface, Lebanon hosts more than 1 percent of its plant species.

BEIRUT: Botany buffs and green thumbs have a new resource at their fingertips: Lebanon Flora, an online database of local plants that launched this week to help scientists, conservationists and amateurs alike take stock of the nation's unique assets. Occupying just 0.007 percent of the world's surface, Lebanon is home to more than 1 percent of its plant species. Approximately 2,613 different flora are found in Lebanon, of which 108 are endemic to the country.

Because of its unique geography and water systems, Lebanon is a "hot point of biodiversity," said Dr. Magda Bou Dagher Kharrat, who spearheaded the database project. "We have a mix [of flora], a fascinating mosaic,"

The project, funded through UNESCO grants, began in 2007 as Bou Dagher Kharrat and a team of scientists worked to document Lebanon's diverse plant life.

The final product, launched earlier this week, is a website providing high-resolution photos and extensive taxonomic information about Lebanon's flower species— all free of charge.

Convincing individuals, often amateurs, to submit their photographs and data to the platform was one of Bou Dagher Kharrat's hardest tasks.

“People are not eager to give things for free,” she told The Daily Star. Many were convinced, however, when they saw the wealth of information the website provided.

The database was designed to be user-friendly and practical for both flora fanatics and greener visitors. Plants can be searched by their scientific or common names, their color or the region in which they are found.

The website could also prove to be a boon for the country’s economy.

“We have groups of ecotourists who pay significant sums to come to visit our plants,” Bou Dagher Kharrat said. One such tour advertised online costs more than \$3,000.

The Lebanon Flora website provides detailed information about the flowering periods of different species, which would facilitate eco-travel plans.

The nation’s biodiversity has suffered dearly from years of conflict. Professor Georges Tohme, president of the National Council of Scientific Research (CNRS), estimates that around 30 plant species disappeared from Lebanon during the Civil War.

The influx of refugees in Lebanon’s biodiversity-rich regions is also threatening plant life, said Bou Dagher Kharrat. “When you have poverty, nature is not respected,” she added.

Tohme said urbanization, agriculture and flower-picking were other reasons for regional extinction of certain flora, particularly in coastal regions. “Since 1987, 10 species once found in Bir Hasan have completely disappeared,” he said.

Bou Dagher Kharrat and her team are hoping to implement a system of “microreserves” throughout Lebanon. Working with communities, landowners and the Environment Ministry, they hope to designate small plots of land with high concentrations of plant diversity as protected areas.

“We’re going to institute it,” she said. “We have the financing, the human and technical means.”

The website operates in conjunction with the Jouzour Loubnan Seed Bank, which collects arboreal seeds to reforest areas experiencing desertification. Reintroducing trees should create environmental conditions that will help more plant species re-emerge.

Lebanon’s flora is part of the nation’s heritage, said Bou Dagher Kharrat. “We must be proud [of Lebanon’s plants] just as we are proud of Fairuz.”

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