

Heimia salicifolia - Sinicuichi

- Lythraceae - Southern North America to Argentina, West Indies



An interesting and still poorly understood Mexican plant is *Heimia salicifolia*, and the very closely allied *H. myrtifolia* (which may represent but a geographical variant), is found in the highlands from Mexico south to Uruguay, Paraguay and northern Argentina. Although unusual uses in folk medicine are reported from widely separated parts of this area, only in Mexico, apparently, has the small shrub been valued as a shamanistic plant. Some of the local vernacular names are suggestive of the biodynamic properties of *Heimia salicifolia*, such as *abre-o-sol* ("sun opener") and *herva de la vida* ("herb of life") in Brazil. The name *sinicuichi*, or derivatives of it such as *sinicuilche* and *sinicuil*, refer to other plants in Mexico, all of which are, in one way or another, intoxicating: species of *Rhynchosia*, *Piscidia* and *Erythrina*; the *sinicuiche* of the Mexican highlands, however, refers to *Heimia salicifolia*.

This plant typifies an hallucinogen of which the hallucinogenic characteristics are auditory, not visual. The natives believe that *sinicuichi* has sacred or supernatural qualities, since they hold that it helps them recall events which took place many years earlier as if they had happened yesterday; others assert that they are able, with *sinicuichi*, to remember pre-natal events.

Alkaloids were first reported in *Heimia salicifolia* in 1958. More recent work has isolated and characterized five alkaloids. One of these alkaloids, *cryogenine*, has been shown to "mimic qualitatively and semi-quantitatively the action of the total alkaloid extracts of *Heimia salicifolia* "

Much observation of an ethnobotanical nature must be carried out in Mexico to amplify our understanding of the possible use in native cultures of the psychotomimetic effects of *Heimia salicifolia*. It has apparently not elsewhere been employed as a narcotic.

TRADITIONAL PREPARATION: The leaves of *sinicuichi* are picked fresh from the plant, and then left for several hours to wilt slightly. They are then crushed in water and the juice is set in the sun to ferment. The resulting drink has mildly intoxicating properties, usually devoid of unpleasant after-effects, with a slight feeling of giddiness followed by a drowsy euphoria characterized by a darkening of the partaker's surroundings, a great shrinking in size of the world around, auditory hallucinations, an altered sense of time and place, forgetfulness and a removal from a state of reality. Sounds seem to come distorted from a great distance.