



Study of the morpho-ecological and biochemical variability and evaluation of the biological activities and pharmaceutical potentialities of an emblematic and native plant species of the arid and semi-arid zones of Morocco: the case of *Withania frutescens* (L.)

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Abstract:

Withania frutescens (L.) is a native and neglected species of arid and semi-arid zones. This species is still present in the natural environments of the Fez-Meknes Region. Our global objective is to characterize the morpho-ecological and phytochemical variability of the species at 4 stations, to evaluate the biological activities of the extracts and essential oils, and the pharmaceutical applications, in particular that of the mucilage for the encapsulation of essential oils and antibiotics.

Field surveys and an ethnobotanical survey were carried out in order to know the distribution of the species and its traditional uses by the indigenous populations. The ecological study (soil, topography, climate, flora) was undertaken in order to characterise the environment and the variability of morphological and histological characteristics in relation to microclimatic conditions. The study of the spatio-temporal variability of total polyphenols was carried out using the Folin-ciocalteu reagent followed by the identification of phenolic compounds by GC-MS after silylation. In order to valorise and validate the traditional use of the plant by the indigenous population, the extracts (leaves and roots) were evaluated for their antioxidant, antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory and antidiabetic activity after an acute and subacute toxicity study. In addition, the pharmacological and environmental potency of the essential oils was evaluated for antioxidant, antimicrobial, insecticidal and anticorrosive activity. The nutritional potentialities were evaluated by ICP, and the mucilages of *W. frutescens* were isolated and separated by column chromatography. They were characterised by Infrared, NMR, Cosy and HBMC to select a molecular structure of these mucilages. This molecule was used as a matrix for encapsulating oils and antibiotics.

The characterisation of the physical environment revealed that *W. frutescens* can live on different types of soil in the semi-arid bioclimatic zone. The floristic composition revealed that the flora of the study areas is composed of 74 species from 32 families, with a dominance of annual herbaceous plants. Morphometry and histometry of *W. frutescens* showed a difference in clump width, plant length and tissue thickness in relation to the microclimatic conditions. Multiplication by germination showed a rate of 88.49%. The ethnobotanical survey revealed that the plant is used, despite its rarity, as a natural treatment against certain infections.

Phytochemical screening of leaves and roots showed the richness of the species in phytochemical compounds, and annual monitoring of total polyphenol content in the four stations revealed that the concentration of these compounds varies from one station to another. 59 compounds were identified for the first time by GC-MS after silylation.

The evaluation of antioxidant and antimicrobial power showed that the hydroalcoholic extract of the roots is more effective than that of the leaves. Toxicity evaluation of the extracts showed no change in the biochemical parameters of the serum and organs of the animals. The evaluation of the therapeutic effects of the two extracts showed anti-inflammatory, healing and anti-diabetic activity.

The evaluation of the biological activities of the essential oils and the hydrolate of the plant studied, showed that the hydrolate has less antioxidant and antimicrobial power than the essential oils. While the latter showed anticorrosive power and insecticidal efficacy at low concentration.

The evaluation of the nutritional potential and pharmaceutical applications of the plant has shown on the one hand that the leaf powder is rich in minerals, that it contains 17 amino acids and 12 vitamins. On the other hand, the optimisation of the extraction of the mucilage revealed a yield of about 92.155%. Its separation on a chromatographic column revealed 10 fractions, which were analysed by Infrared, NMR, COSY, HBMC. We were able to purify and characterise, for the first time, a mucilage molecule. The results of the encapsulation of the nanoparticles proved that this mucilage is a good matrix for encapsulating essential oils and antibiotics.

Key words: *Withania frutescens*; Ecology; Floristic range; Multiplication; Phytochemical characterisation; Antioxidant; Antimicrobial; Toxicity; Antiinflammatory; Bioinsecticide; Anticorrosive; Nutritional value; Mucilage; Encapsulation