



BEET

BEET, *Beta vulgaris* L., commonly called *čoḡondar* in Persian (variant forms found in some older texts: *čokondar/čogondar*, *čondar*; cf. Māzandarānī *čangel/čangol*, and Arabicized forms *sawandar*, *šawandar*, *šamandar banjar*, etc., sometimes used instead of the older Ar. name *selq*).

Our present cultivated *čoḡondar*, referring to several varieties of *Beta vulgaris*, is descended from the wild species thereof, *B. maritima* L. (= *B. vulgaris* L. var. *maritima* Boiss.), which still grows in southeastern (Balūčestān) and southwestern (around Kōrramšahr) Iran (see Ş. Mobayyen, *Flora* II, p. 224, who also records two other wild species of *Beta* L. in Iran, namely, *B. lomatozona* Fisch. et Mey., p. 221, and *B. macrorrhiza* Stev., p. 224).

The present distinction of beet varieties into vegetable (or red) beet, sugar beet, and fodder beet was unknown to the early Islamic botanists-pharmacologists, who, in common with their Greek predecessors (namely Theophrastus, Dioscorides, and Galen), were interested above all in its medicinal virtues, generally discounting its nutritive value. Dioscorides (1st cent. a.d.), whose *Ketāb al-ḥašā'eš* was the primary source of botanic-therapeutic information in the Islamic world, as quoted by Ebn al-Bayṭār (*al-Jāme'* III, pp. 26-27), says there are two kinds of beet, the "black" one, which is costive (especially its root), and another one, which is emollient, and that both kinds produce bad chyme in the stomach. Galen, also quoted by Ebn al-Bayṭār (*ibid.*), likewise considers it harmful to the stomach, because it contains a "moisture" that occasions the loosening of bowels and "burns" the stomach and intestines. Further, he thinks, it is "of little nutritive value like other



potherbs.” Although the *selq* of Medieval authors, assumed as the Arabic counterpart of Greek *sikelós* (in Theophrastus, applied to the “white” kind of *teutlon*, i.e., *Beta sicla* L.) and *sikeliōtikós*, seems to have referred, not only to common beet, but also to some similar genera (*Chenopodium*, *Rumex*) which may have had different medicinal or nutritional properties (cf. *Toḥfat al-aḥbāb*, no. 377, p. 164, and Samarqandī, no. 265, p. 204), subsequent Arabic- and Persian-writing authors on materia medica have generally stuck to the appellation *selq*, under which, therefore, a medley of virtues and uses is recorded. Of these only some indicated by the authors quoted by Ebn al-Bayṭār (ibid.) will be mentioned here (for a full account in Persian, see ‘Aqīlī Ḳorāsānī, *Maḳzan al-adwīa*, p. 248, s.v. *selq*): *Selq* is very efficacious against splenic obstructions (Galen); snuffing its expressed juice with diluted honey is good for earache; washing the head with a decoction of its root and leaves gets rid of nits and dandruff, the same decoction is useful for chaps due to cold; applying its raw leaves on vitiligo spots (after washing these with natron), alopecic spots, and malignant sores will be useful; applying cooked leaves thereof will cure pustules, burns and erysipelas (Dioscorides); rubbing the head with its expressed juice kills lice and gets rid of scurf; applying this juice on freckles will remove them, and on an alopecic area will make hair grow again there (Qoṣṭos, in his *Felāḥat al-rūmīya*); a cataplasm of *selq* will remove warts; applying *selq* with honey will cure tetter; snuffing its juice with the bile of crane (*korkī*) will cure facial palsy (Ebn Sīnā); it curbs phlegmatic plethora (Rāzī); it is good for muscular tremor; it stimulates the carnal appetite; reportedly, *selq* juice, when poured into wine, will turn this into vinegar in two hours, and if poured into vinegar, will turn it into wine in four hours; it is good for gout and arthralgia (Ġāfeqī). Additionally, in Shi‘ite traditions, eating *selq* (with or without beef) is reported as a divinely-prescribed cure for leprosy and vitiligo (*bayāż*) (for the authorities on this and other virtues of *selq*, cf. Abū Ja‘far Aḥmad Barqī, *Maḥāsen*, pp. 519-20). Hardly any of these therapeutic uses of *selq/čogondar* has persisted through our time.

Despite the disparaging pronouncements of some of these classical authors regarding *selq* as a food article, its use as a vegetable seems to have persisted. In the Timurid period, the facetious poet **Boshāq Aṭ‘ema** (d. 814/1416), in his *Dīvān*, mentions *čogondar* as one of the four pillars (*arkān*) of *āš-e serka* (*āš* with vinegar), p. 15, *čogondar* leaves as an ingredient of *kašk-bā* (*bā* with dried whey; see [āš i](#)), p. 24, *dūg-bā* (*bā* with diluted sour yogurt), pp. 36, 59, *selq* in two kinds of *māst-bā* (*bā* with yogurt), pp. 76, 77, in two varieties of *āš-e somāq* (*āš* with sumac), pp. 85-86, and *čogondar* in *āš-e nārdān* (*āš* with



pomegranate grains), p. 88. Later, in the Safavid period, the author of *Kār-nāma*, a cookery-book written in 927/1520-21, ed. Afšār, *Āšpazī*, uses *selq* in *āš-e rīvās* (*āš* with rhubarb), pp. 90-91, and “white *selq*” in *qalya-ye somāq* (*qalya* with sumac), pp. 145-47 [*qalya* is the designation of a variety of dishes; one kind is a stew containing fried pieces of meat, tiny meatballs, split peas, broad beans, *lūbīā* beans, pounded walnut kernels, minced beet root, pomegranate juice, and spices]. In *Māddat al-ḥayāt* (ed. Afšār, *Āšpazī*), an opuscle on cookery from the same period, the author, a certain Nūr-Allāh, cook at the court of ‘Abbās I, uses *čoḡondar* in an *āš-e boḡrā* (a kind of *āš-e rešta*) with pomegranate juice, p. 242, in *āš-e gīlakī* (Gīlānī-style *āš*), p. 245, and in *qalya-ye māst* (*qalya* with yogurt), p. 253. As can be seen, vegetable beet was used mainly in various *āšes* in those periods,—a use still prevalent in our time (see below).

The vegetable (or garden) beet, *B. vulgaris* var. *rubra*, referred to in modern Persian as *čoḡondar-e labūī* or *č.-e āš*, with its remarkable sugar content (about 5-17 percent), is widely cultivated in Iran, and has several culinary uses. *Labū*, i.e., usually steam-cooked large globular purplish-red taproots of this *čoḡondar*, is sold for on-the-spot consumption by seasonal *labū*-hawkers throughout Iran during cold months. Cold *labū* slices, mixed with yogurt (called *māst o labū*) or *kašk* (*kašk o labū*), are eaten as a kind of salad or snack. The leaves are used along with, or instead of, spinach practically in all *āšes*, especially in *āš-e rešta* (containing also beet root).

Sugar beet, *čoḡondar-e qand*, is a relatively new crop: its cultivation in Iran was first introduced in 1274/1857-58 by the Austrian J. E. Polak, professor of medicine at Dār al-Fonūn (Polytechnic School) in Tehran, and private physician (1855-60) to the Qajar king Nāṣer-al-Dīn (see *Safar-nāma-ye Polak*, translator’s foreword, p. 5). The concession of establishing and exploiting the first beet sugar factory in Iran was granted to a Belgian company, and the factory, erected in Kahrīzak (about 21 km from Tehran on the road to Isfahan), became operational late in 1895, producing sugar of a better quality than the sugar imported at that time mainly from Russia. Alarmed by the eventual self-sufficiency of Iran in sugar production, Russia engaged in overt and covert machination which eventually brought about the bankruptcy and closure of the factory in 1898 (for the various factors involved in that beet sugar fiasco, see Jamālzāda, *Ganj-e šāyegān*, pp. 99-100, and Rīāḥī, *Taḥqīq*, pp. 117ff.). It was but in 1310 Š./1931-32, under Reżā Shah Pahlavī (1925-41), that the defunct Kahrīzak factory was made operational again. It was followed by other beet



sugar factories in Šāhī (Māzandarān) and Varāmīn, both in 1313 Š./1934-35, in Šāhābād-e Ġarb (Kermānšāhān) and Marvdašt (north of Shiraz), both in 1314 Š./1935-36, in Ābkūh (near Mašhad) and Mīāndoāb (West Azarbaijan), both in 1315 Š./1936-37, during the reign of Rezā Shah (for further information about beet sugar industry in Iran down to 1336 Š./1957-58, see Rīāḥī, pp. 120ff.): In the agricultural year 1363-64 Š./1984-85, the total area under sugar beet cultivation in Iran was 144,823 hectares, yielding 3,923,729 tons of beet (Ministry of Agriculture, *Āmār-nāma*, p. 22), which fed 35 sugar factories throughout the country (*Gāh-nāma*, pp. 46-47).

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