
Fake Malaria Drugs in SE Asia

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In EDN 95 (April 2007) we mentioned that an advantage of growing your own artemisia (*Artemisia annua*) plants to make an anti-malarial tea is that commercial medicines often are fakes. The February 16, 2008 issue of New Scientist (www.newscientist.com) (<http://www.newscientist.com/>) tells how Interpol, the World Health Organization and the Chinese government located one of two suspected factories producing fake drugs and arrested two key suspects.

The bad news is that (1) the other most important fake drug “factory” that is believed to operate in China has not been located, (2) the owner of the company that was located has disappeared and (3) there is reason to suspect that the illicit drug trade (i.e. narcotics) is involved and that they will regroup.

According to the article, up to 52 per cent of tablets sold across the region including Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Burma and Thailand contain no artesunate (a drug made by slightly altering artemisinin so that it is soluble and can be given by injection as well as by mouth). Fake drugs are being seen in Africa, probably coming from these same sources. Some even have elaborate packaging with fake holograms that were designed to prevent counterfeiting.

In some of the fake drugs, investigators found safrole, a precursor of the illegal drug ecstasy. That is one reason that they believe the illicit drug trade is involved. Some of the fake drugs contained an analgesic (a painkiller) that eases symptoms causing patients to wrongly conclude that they are getting better.

Here at ECHO we were encouraged to see how well our artemisia plants did during the hot, humid summer season last year (we are at 26 degrees north latitude). Many temperate plants do not survive tropical or subtropical heat and humidity, so I had not expected the artemisia plants to survive. They actually had very high leaf production and grew to be quite bushy shrubs, reaching around seven feet tall. Late in the summer they went to seed and died. Was this caused by the decreasing day-length? As we mentioned in our article, once a plant goes to seed it dies. We are finding that new plants can be very easily started from cuttings with four to five nodes. If material for making cuttings is limited, we can use pieces with as few as two nodes. When we have done this, however, these smaller cuttings produced fewer roots than did the larger cuttings by the time we transplanted them to the field.