SASI INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY & ENGINEERING
AUTONOMOUS TADEPALLIGUDEM WEST GODAVARI DISTRICT
Department of Computer Science & Engineering

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Project Batch No: 22CSEA03 Supervisor: E V Sandeep

# Background Report: Classification of Medicinal Plant Species

## Global and Indian Diversity

Medicinal plants represent a vast and invaluable resource for healthcare worldwide. Estimates suggest that between 3,000 and 8,000 species are used across traditional and modern medicine systems, with new entries continually documented.

In India, more than 7,200 botanical names—corresponding to roughly 1,500 distinct species figure in codified systems such as Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani, Homeopathy, Sowa-Rigpa, and innumerable local and tribal traditions. This extraordinary diversity reflects India's varied climates, from tropical rainforests to alpine zones, and underscores the importance of regional conservation, sustainable harvesting, and community-driven documentation of indigenous knowledge.

## Categorization in Traditional Systems

Over centuries, various medical traditions organized plants according to their own principles and therapeutic insights. The main registries in India illustrate this breadth:

| System | Botanical Names | Distinct Species | Key Organizational Focus |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ayurveda | 2,559 | 1,540 | Taste, potency, energetic qualities |
| Siddha | 2,267 | 1,149 | Elemental forces and herb energetics |
| Unani | 1,049 | 493 | Temperament (hot/cold) and humoral balance |
| Homeopathy | 460 | 372 | "Like cures like" properties and potencies |
| Sowa-Rigpa | 671 | 250 | Himalayan phytogeography and physiology |
| Folk Traditions | 6,400 | 5,376 | Local, seasonal, ritual uses |

Each tradition captured unique aspects of plant action, from doshic balance in Ayurveda to humoral balance in Unani and the similia principle in Homeopathy.

**Ayurvedic Attribute Organization**

Ayurvedic texts classify plants using five core attributes that inform formulation and dosing:

- Rasa (taste): sweet, sour, salty, pungent, bitter, astringent
- Guna (quality pairs): heavy vs. light, oily vs. dry
- Virya (potency): heating or cooling effects
- Vipaka (post-digestive effect): long-term metabolic actions
- Prabhava (unique action): inexplicable effects, e.g., Shankhapushpi's cognitive benefits

This schema guided practitioners in predicting how an herb interacts with tissues and doshas.

**Morphological Habit Organization**

Botanists and herbalists have long grouped plants by growth form, reflecting ecological roles and harvest methods:

- Herbs: soft-stemmed (Tulsi, Brahmi)
- Shrubs: multi-stemmed woody plants (Neem)
- Trees: durable bark and resin providers (Asoka)
- Climbers/Lianas: vine species on hosts (Guduchi)
- Creepers/Sedges: ground-spreading roots (Nagarmotha)
- Aquatic Herbs: wetland specialists (Lotus)

**Organ-Used Organization**

Therapeutic potential often depends on the harvested organ:

- Leaves: respiratory support (Ashwagandha), liver protection (Bhumyamalaki)
- Roots/Rhizomes: adaptogens like Turmeric
- Bark/Wood: tannins and alkaloids in Cinnamon, Giloy
- Flowers: volatile oils in Chamomile
- Fruits/Seeds: antioxidants in Amla, Fennel
- Resins/Gums: triterpenoids in Guggul

- Whole Plant: broad-spectrum use (Euphorbia hirta)

**Phytochemical Grouping**

Chemical-centric grouping aligns species with dominant metabolites and uses:

- Alkaloids: analgesics (Papaver somniferum)
- Phenolics/Tannins: antioxidants (Camellia sinensis)
- Terpenes/Essential Oils: antimicrobials (Mentha, Eucalyptus)
- Saponins: expectorants/adaptogens (Liquorice)
- Glycosides: cardiac modulators (Digitalis)

**Leaf-Based Classification Criteria**

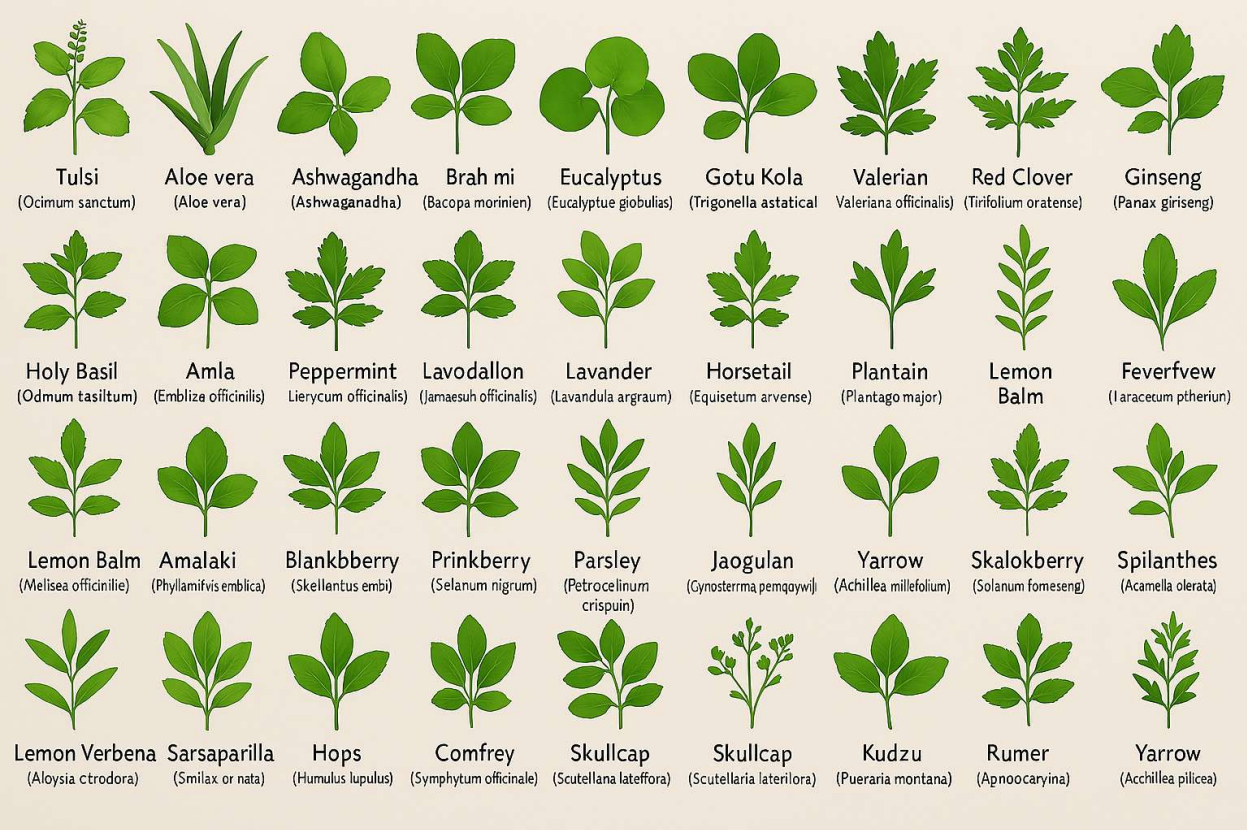
Leaves serve as the most accessible organ for field identification. Our study will classify Ayurvedic medicinal plants based on these leaf traits:

| **Trait** | **Description** |
|---|---|
| Texture | Smooth, waxy, hairy, rough, puckered |
| Edge Pattern | Entire (smooth), serrated, lobed, wavy |
| Overall Shape | Ovate, lanceolate, cordate, palmate, linear |
| Additional Features | Mid-rib prominence, secondary vein angles, petiole structure |

By focusing on leaf morphology, we establish a practical, visually guided framework for species diagnosis in the field.

**Visual Gallery of Representative Leaves**

- Tulsi (Ocimum sanctum): heart-shaped with slight serration and pungent aroma
- Aloe vera: thick, succulent, glabrous leaves demonstrating water storage
- Neem (Azadirachta indica): pinnate leaflets with fine serration
- Ashwagandha (Withania somnifera): lanceolate, entire-margined, slightly hairy
- Brahmi (Bacopa monnieri): small obovate leaves with delicate venation




## References

1. https://www.medicinalplants.in/