

How Picking Wild Botanicals Supports Rural Families in Ajara

Tago Village Case Study

Introduction

This document presents a case study conducted in Tago Village, Khulo, Ajara, among rural households engaged in wild botanical collection during the summer transhumance season, when livestock are moved to highland pastures. The pickers in this study represent some of approximately 1,200 rural producers from whom Noma Ltd sources wild botanicals, either directly or through intermediaries, across six regions of Georgia. These areas include populations with ethnic minorities, eco-migrants, and households living below the poverty line, for whom this activity serves as an important source of seasonal income. Since programme facilitation (2023) Noma has collected 747 tonnes of wild botanicals and paid 1.9m Gel to 1,238 (41% women) rural pickers ¹.

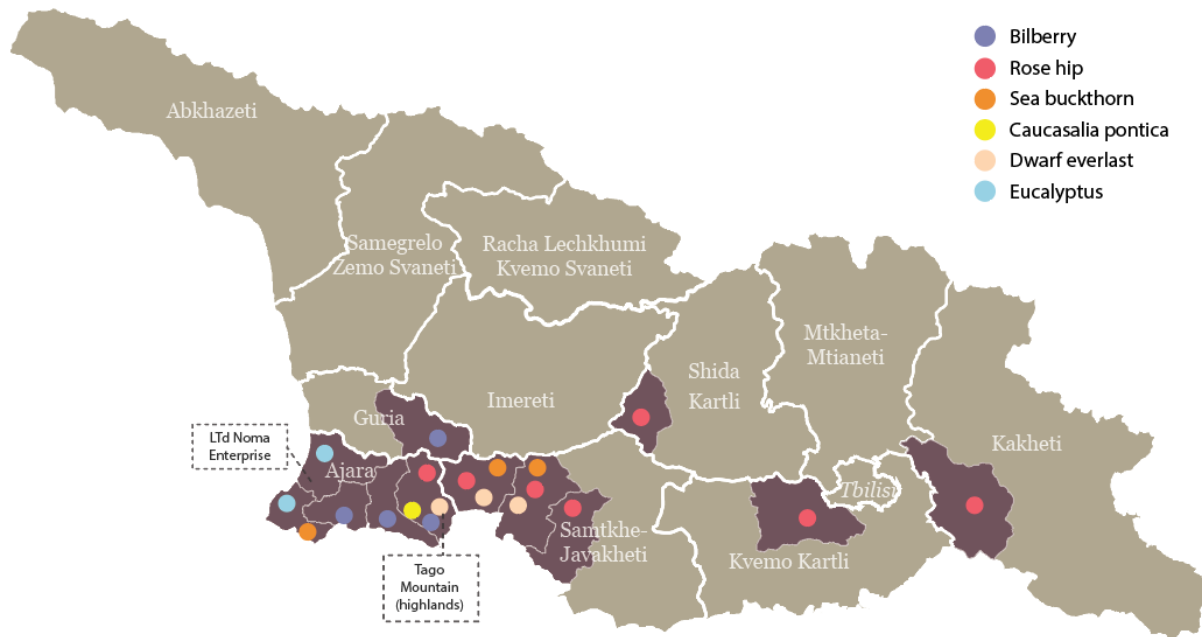


Figure 1: Noma Ltd Wild Botanical Collection areas by type of plants

The objective of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of the picking activity and its importance and impact, from the perspective of the rural pickers. The research aimed to explore their

¹ Since ALCP2, facilitation (July 2023) Noma Ltd has collected wild botanicals from 1238 rural supplier households (638 new pickers) who benefit from improved transportation services and access to regular market. They have generated 192,000 Gel in income attributable to programme facilitation. The annual collection of wild botanicals has increased by 85% from 200 tonnes on average/ year (2022 baseline year) to 370 tonnes in 2024. The client has generated 169,123 Net additional income during 2023,2024 years, which is attributable to the programme.

motivations, perceived benefits, and challenges, and to understand how wild botanical collection fits into their everyday routines and livelihoods.

Qualitative, in-depth, face-to-face/ community interviews were conducted with female pickers, the primary actors in this role, from Tago Village, a remote village in Khulo municipality. The interviews also included one woman who organizes and coordinates the picking group. While grounded in the context of a single village, these findings offer insights that are reflective of broader patterns observed in similar communities engaged in wild botanical collection across Georgia.

The Story

Every summer, about a dozen families from Tago village, Khulo Municipality in Ajara head for the mountains of Tago (about 40 km away, adjacent to Adigeni municipality in Samtskhe Javakheti Region and Turkish border), taking their cattle and settling in for the season. This highland pasture area traditionally belongs to the village, and many other villages in mountainous areas across Georgia have a similar system in summer. These three months in the highlands are filled with hard work; tending animals, making dairy products, planting potatoes, cutting hay (for cattle feed) and picking wild botanicals. In recent years, picking and selling Dwarf Everlast has become a significant part of this routine and a valuable addition to income.

What started as a small side activity has become a more important part of life in the mountains. With the arrival of Noma, a company that collects and processes (dries) wild plants for export and local markets, people in Tago have found a way to earn a consistent income by gathering herbs like Dwarf Everlast, a perennial plant traditionally used in herbal medicine and as a decorative dried flower². It had not been collected in this area prior to Noma Ltd's arrival which started about five years ago. Improved transportation and drying facilities (implemented with the support of the ALCP2 programme from 2023) have furthered Noma's ability to collect fresh wild botanicals directly from villages, rather than dried. This change made a difference not only for the company but for the pickers as well. Tago villagers are among many rural communities who now benefit from this.



² Main uses: **Medicinal:** Known for its anti-inflammatory, liver-protective, and digestive-supporting properties; used in teas or extracts for liver and gallbladder health, indigestion, and mild respiratory issues.

Decorative: Keeps its shape and color when dried, making it popular in dried flower arrangements.

The High Pasture Households



Life in the mountains during the summer is full. Each day begins early with cattle needing tending, cows needing milking, and the work never waits. Families also plant potatoes, gather hay, and produce dairy products, which they use at home and also sell in nearby locations, such as the Beshumi resort Village.

Most of this work is carried out by women who stay in the highlands, often managing everything on their own while other family members are busy either working in town or staying at home and taking care of the village household. Between milking cows and making cheese, many of these women also find time to pick wild botanicals from the surrounding slopes, herbs like Dwarf Everlast (*Helichrysum plicatum*), wild mint, dandelion, nettle, and even forest raspberries and mushrooms both for home and sale.

Picking

Picking starts mid-morning, once the animals are cared for. Groups head into the hills, usually walking over a kilometer to reach the gathering spots. The slopes are steep, but the plants are abundant. By afternoon, each picker may fill up to three sacks of Dwarf Everlast. These are brought down to the riverside, a vehicle-accessible point and from there transported back to the village by car. This setup has made it easier for many to participate, including elderly and younger pickers who no longer have to carry the loads on foot.

About five years ago, picking Dwarf Everlast also meant drying it, a time-consuming and tiring task. People had to find space, usually indoors, to lay out the plants, turning them often to keep them from spoiling. If the herbs got wet or stayed too long in the sacks, they would rot or lose color and smell. Drying also meant handling smaller volumes, there simply wasn't enough space to dry everything at once.

That changed about two years ago, when Noma started purchasing fresh plants directly and had expanded drying capability and improved transport. Now, pickers don't have to dry Dwarf Everlast

themselves. They collect it in the field and keep it in good condition until pickup and hand them over raw.

This shift has made things much easier and more profitable. Noma comes directly to the village to collect the plants and also provides fuel for transportation from the collection sites. During peak season, the buyer may visit twice a week, making it easier for pickers to gather and sell more. The process has become more regular and better organized.

Picking Benefits for the Households

Pickers follow certain rules as instructed by Noma, to maintain plant population sustainability. For example, they use sickles or knives to cut Dwarf Everlast and avoid pulling out the entire plant and the roots, from the ground.

The amount picked usually depends on what villagers can manage during the season rather than any pre-ordered volume. Some pickers say that Dwarf Everlast is a easy and profitable plant to collect compared to others.

‘Last year, I had 2,000 GEL income from selling dairy products, and 1,400 GEL from selling Nego [Dwarf Everlast]. But those dairy products had their production expenses. This one was pure profit. I used it to buy cattle feed, for everyday expenses at home, and I even bought some kitchen and living room furniture.’ said one female respondent from Tago.



All these positive changes seem to be supported by nature itself, with *Nego* becoming more abundant in picking areas over the past few years. According to a local woman who organizes the picking process for Tago villagers, the mountains seem to be growing more plants now than before, especially Dwarf Everlast.

‘At first, there wasn’t much of it. Now there’s plenty, and people are coming from other villages too.’

No one is sure why the plants have increased, but some believe regular picking may have helped with the spread.

The picking organizer also noted that more buyers are showing up not just Noma, but collectors from the nearby villages of Adigeni- Ude and Arali. Still, pickers from Tago Village prefer selling to Noma. The company offers better prices, sometimes a lari higher per kilo, and is open to negotiating if pickers are dissatisfied or know of better offers.

‘The company owner even brings us groceries from town when we ask, which is very convenient. He also covers the cost of transport fuel so we can bring the picked plants from the picking site to our village, where he comes with his vehicle to collect them,’ she added.

Her observations reflect what many others have noticed, picking wild botanicals has become a more attractive and better-organized part of summer life in the mountains.

For the families spending their summers in Tago, wild botanical picking has grown into something more than a side activity. With Noma buying fresh herbs directly and covering transport costs, the work has become easier, more regular, and more profitable. People can now sell what they gather without drying, avoid spoilage, and earn decent income with less effort.

The extra money goes toward cattle feed, household needs, or even furniture. Some villagers say they now have more time and energy for other work. And while fewer households come to the mountains than in the past, those who still do find that picking herbs fits naturally into their summer routine alongside tending cows, making cheese, and living off the land.

‘My main motivation [to start and continue picking] was that I could get additional income from this activity,’ said one Female rural picker from Tago Village. ***‘I think this work is worth it — better and more comfortable than working abroad [seasonal picking work]. Here, in the mountains, you’re in a good place, with clean air’***, She added.

Info About ALCP2 Facilitation

Noma Ltd and Sunelis Sakhli Ltd are the two wild botanical collection and processing companies the ALCP2 has facilitated. It has recently produced the *Wild Botanicals Sustainable Picking Guidelines* which the two companies are now using with their pickers to ensure sustainable collection and which will also be more widely disseminated through the Women’s Rooms network and to other market players as the wild botanicals sector is only set to grow. Please go to www.alcp.ge Library ALCP2 (2025) Wild Botanicals Picking Guidelines. Alliances Caucasus 2 Programme. For the full English and Georgian versions.

