Asparagus scandens | Plantz Africa

Introduction

*Asparagus scandens* is a delicate-looking yet sturdy forest-dwelling climbing perennial, ideal for a trellis in a small garden or as a groundcover under trees.

Description

*Asparagus scandens* is a slender, climbing or scrambling shrublet up to 2 m high with tuberous roots and fine-textured, fresh green foliage. Its evergreen needle-like 'leaves' are actually flattened branches called cladodes. They are small, narrowly lance-shaped, curved, 5-15 mm long and 1-2 mm wide. They lie in one plane and are arranged in threes with a single smaller one opposite a pair of larger cladodes. This species does not form spines. Tiny pendulous, white flowers appear sporadically during spring and summer (September to January), and small, spherical, orange-red berries from late spring (October) onwards.

Conservation Status

Status

Least Concern. *Asparagus scandens* is not threatened.

Distribution and habitat

Distribution description

*Asparagus scandens* is found in forest and bush in shade on coastal mountains in the Western Cape and Eastern Cape from
Gifberg to the Tsitsikamma Mountains. It is frequent in the forests on the eastern slopes of Table Mountain and in the natural area of Kirstenbosch. It prefers moist, shady places, and a warm (21°C) temperature average. It is water-wise but tender to frost. *Asparagus scandens* can also be found in New Zealand and Australia, where it has naturalised and become an invasive weed, tolerating a wide range of habitats, even salty sea spray.

**Derivation of name and historical aspects**

**History**

The name *Asparagus* derives from the Greek *asparagos* for the edible cultivated asparagus, possibly derived from *a-*, intensive, and *sparasso*, to tear, which refers to the sharp spines on many of the *Asparagus* species, or from *spargan*, to swell or sprout. *Scandens* means climbing, from the Latin *scando*, referring to its climbing nature.

*Asparagus scandens* is one of 81 southern African *Asparagus* species, in a genus of approximately 120 species, occurring mainly in Africa but also in Asia and Europe and introduced in Australia.

**Ecology**

Seed is dispersed by birds, which are attracted to the orange-red berries. Its tuberous roots store water and nutrients, and allow the plant to survive and resprout should the stems be broken off, cut off, burnt or frosted. The study by Timmins & Reid (2000) established that this species resprouts only from the meristematic tissue on the rootstock just underneath the soil surface and not from pieces of the root.

**Uses**

*Asparagus scandens* has great possibilities for use in gardens and urban landscapes. With its fine-textured, fresh green foliage, it takes up little visual space, and looks fantastic growing up a pillar or other structures, providing a soft green chiffon-like veil to whatever it covers. It has a small footprint and, if a support is provided, will climb upwards, taking up little actual space. These two characteristics make it ideal for a small garden, and especially small townhouse gardens, which are often walled. Birds are attracted to the red berries, and planting *Asparagus scandens* will help to draw birds to the garden. The tuberous roots ensure that it is drought-resistant and thus water-wise. *Asparagus scandens* has potential to be used in the cutflower trade for its interesting, fern-like foliage.
Growing Asparagus scandens

Grow

Asparagus scandens is best grown from seed. Sow in spring or summer in a seed tray filled with a general, well-drained seed-sowing medium. Cover the seeds lightly with sifted bark, and water well. Keep in a protected area in light shade, watering when required; do not allow the soil to dry out completely. Water the germinated seedlings with Kelpak at regular intervals. Prick out seedlings when sturdily grown, and repot into a compost-rich, loamy medium. Grow on in light shade, and water regularly. Feed at regular intervals to ensure lush and luxuriant growth. For vegetative propagation, divide the clump of tuberous roots and grow on. (C. Viljoen, 2009, pers. comm.).

Asparagus scandens is a lovely climber for a shady corner, or underneath trees, where it will climb up the trunks and scramble over the ground. The fresh, feathery impression of its leaves will be set off and contrast well with the larger, more lush leaves of other shade-loving plants, such as Plectranthus spp., Streptocarpus spp., Brillantaisia subulugurica and the shiny, strap-like leaves of Olivia spp. and Veltheimia bracteata. It is also suitable for cultivation in containers. It is drought tolerant but performs better if given moisture all year round. It is tender to frost, but should survive underground and resprout if cut down by frost.

Although it can look scrappy and less-than-impressive in the wild, climbing asparagus, when planted and cared for, will reward the grower with beautiful foliage and a sturdy disposition.

References


Credits

Gabrielle Solomon & Alice Notten
Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden
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