Tetragonia decumbens | Plantz Africa

Introduction

This widespread dune plant is edible and also performs an important role in stabilizing the sand, enabling the dune to develop into a friendly environment for other plants.

Description

This is a spreading shrub with dark green, sessile, glistening leaves. The sheen is caused by small, shiny, water-storage cells that cover the surface of the leaf. The small, 4-petalled, yellow flowers are situated in groups of 3-5 in the upper leaf axils. They flower from August to November. The fruits are thickly 4-winged.

Distribution and habitat

Distribution description

Found on coastal sand dunes from southern Namibia to the Eastern Cape.

Derivation of name and historical aspects

History

The genus name is derived from the Latin word, *tetragonus* which means 4-angled, relating to the fruit, and *decumbens* means prostrate with tip rising upwards.

Ecology
Ecology

An early colonizer of moist sand dunes, it is an extremely valuable plant for stabilizing moving sand. It acts as a seed-trap and also provides organic matter that enables other species to grow on the dunes. The accumulation of plants matter such as that of *Tetragonia decumbens*, and the subsequent establishment of other plants, enable dunes to develop from fore dunes to rear dunes that are stabilized by increasing plant growth. The four-angled fruits are easily blown about by the wind, aiding their dispersal.

Uses

Apart from their very important use to stabilize moving sand, the plants are also edible. The new growth, which occurs during the rainy season, is the best to use. The tops and leafy stems are harvested and must be thoroughly washed to remove the clinging sea sand. They are then boiled and because the flavour is rather bland, one of the traditional Cape seasonings, in the form of *Oxalis pes-caprae*, and a blob of butter added to the dish make it more palatable. The texture of the resulting spinach is somewhat grainy, but not unpleasant. Raw leaves have a somewhat salty taste. It is thought that with appropriate selection, the plant could be domesticated, yielding a crop similar to its close relative, New Zealand spinach, *Tetragonia tetragonioides*.

Growing Tetragonia decumbens

Grow

The easiest method of growing this plant is to pull up branches from the sand and separate pieces with roots attached as cuttings. These can be planted directly *in situ* into well-drained, sandy soil, which must be kept slightly moist until the plants have established themselves.

Pests and diseases: The leaves are occasionally chewed by insects, but are more likely to be damaged to a very small extent by strong winds and sandblasting. Trampling also causes damage.

References


Credits

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Harold Porter National Botanical Garden
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