



Stephen Barstow, our extreme salad man from Norway (see PM50), introduces Caucasian Spinach (*Habitzia tamnoides*) and asks why this foremost temperate perennial spinach – ideal for the forest garden – is virtually unknown outside of Scandinavia.

About five years ago, I received an email from a Swedish woman, Lena Ivarsson. She told me that she had written several books on vegetables and herbs and that she was very interested in trying out some species, in particular various onions (*Allium*) which would be hardy in the Stockholm area where she lived. I sent her various *Allium* seed that had grown well for me and to my great surprise she sent me two of her books in return as a thank you. I wrote back to her later and said that one of these books, *Köksträdgården: Det Götiske Arvet*, written in 1926, was one

of the most interesting books I had read on vegetables. (Unfortunately, it is not available in English, but translates as *The Kitchen Garden: our great heritage*). Among the more unusual vegetables, there was one that was completely unknown to me, *Habitzia tamnoides*. It has no official English name as yet, but we can call it Caucasian Spinach. I searched for this species in the most important reference works on edible plants (e.g. Ken Fern's *Plants for a Future* and Stephen Facciola's *Companion II: A Sourcebook of Edible Plants*), but drew a complete blank. Neither was it possible

to source this plant in any of the UK nurseries covered by the comprehensive Royal Horticultural Society's Plant Finder (www.rhs.org.uk/rhsplantfinder/) although it had been offered by one nursery in 1999. The *European Garden Flora* (with 17,000 taxa) surprisingly didn't mention this plant either. The same year I obtained some seed through trading with another Swede and one plant resulted.

Habitzia tamnoides (written also as *thamnoides* by Lena Ivarsson, but according to Helen Kewensis, *tamnoides* is correct) is a perennial climber from the Caucasus (both in the north and north of this region), is found particularly in spruce and beech woods, among rocks and in ravines and along rivers. *Habitzia* is named in honour of Carl Ludwig Habicht, a naturalist from the 18th century who was also vice-governor in the Crimea. The epithet *tamnoides* refers to its resemblance to Black Bryony (*Tamus communis*), a native found in southern England and further south in Europe. Black Bryony is also a climber and its leaves are very similar in appearance to *Habitzia*. In antiquity, the young shoots of *Tamus* were apparently preferred to asparagus and they still used today in various ritualistic spring dishes based around 50 or more wild herbs, particularly in Italy.

In Sweden the plant is called Rankpenast, whereas here in Norway it is Stjernemelisse (Rankpenast was already in use for *Basilica alba* or Malabar Spinach). In Finland, look for *Koyvatsipinnatit* and *Kaukkaista Ronnimalti* in Estonia.

Habitzia climbs to 2-3m in the course of a very short period during spring/early summer. The lowest leaves are heart-shaped with a long stalk. The flowers are green and small and remind me somewhat of Lady's Mantle (*Alchemilla* sp.). The seeds are rather unusual, small (about 1.5mm), very shiny and black.

Lena Ivarsson describes the history of *Habitzia* in Sweden in her book. The plant was originally introduced to gardens as an attractive climber around 1870. It took only a few years, however, for people to discover that the leaves were also edible. The plant never became very popular, but was grown in some of the biggest manor house gardens.

I have not been able to find any reference to the use of *Habitzia* as a wild edible in its home territory in the Caucasus.

Top left: Caucasian Spinach climbing up the author's house in Norway.

Right: Newly harvested spring shoots of Caucasian Spinach.

In the *Flora of the USSR*, the economic importance of this species is stated only as an ornamental garden plant used for pergolas, porches etc. It turns out that *Habitzia* was also grown, or at least trialed successfully, in Norway in the late 19th century, even in the very far north of the country in Finnmark, reaching for its complete hardiness. The plant is also mentioned in various Scandinavian gardening books from the early 1900s. I also have one reference from the late 19th century suggesting that *Habitzia* spreads like a weed. I haven't come across this as a problem elsewhere, however, and suggest that this species may possibly have been confused with its cousin Good King Henry (*Chenopodium bonus-henricus*) which is known to be a bit of a problem if allowed to seed itself. It is also known that relic populations of individual plants have survived to the present day in several places in Sweden, southern Norway and Finland (see *Flora Nordica*).

Stratification (cold treatment) seems to help the germination of *Habitzia* seed. The resultant plants grow slowly during the first year but growth accelerates and full height can be reached in the second year. My plant grows up a south-facing wall of my house, but can just as easily be grown in shady conditions (it is after all a woodlander). In order that the first harvest is as early as possible, however, it's wise to plant in a sunny place. Obviously, it doesn't seem to demand very fertile conditions and with growth mostly

early in the year when there is usually sufficient moisture, it isn't sensitive to drought. The most noticeable feature of this plant is its incredible growth rate early in the year. It seems also to be perfectly hardy and should tolerate late frosts. In fact, I noticed here in central Norway with plenty of snow that the young shoots had already grown a few centimetres in February last year. From a single plant, I have counted over 100 shoots in the spring. Two years ago, we had a mild April with little frost and we were able to harvest the young shoots three times in the course of the month (cut-and-come-again) before we allowed the plant to grow on. I have grown thousands of edibles here and I know no other perennial edible which is anywhere near as productive so early in the season.

One can use the young shoots in all dishes for which one would have used spinach – in soups, pies, pizza, Indian and oriental dishes etc.

Botanically, *Habitzia* belongs to the Goosefoot family (*Chenopodiaceae*) and is the only species in its genus (monotypic). It is therefore related to other well known vegetables such as beetroot, swiss chard, spinach, and garden orach (*Atriplex hortensis*), to the South American grain crop, quinoa (*Chenopodium quinoa*), and the herb epazote or wormseed (*Chenopodium ambrosioides*) used in Mexican cuisine. We also have the aforementioned Good King Henry (*Chenopodium bonus-henricus*), frequently cultivated as a spinach plant in herb gardens, but poor in comparison with *Habitzia* in its usefulness (productivity) as a spinach plant.

Finally, there are a number of wild herbs and weeds which have long been used for food, such as fat hen (*Chenopodium album*) familiar to gardeners, sea beet and Hart's Orach (*Atriplex hastata*), both commonly found near the sea. Both the leaves and seeds of fat hen have been used. In fact, it is known that seed was found in the stomachs of several of the Danish bog people as well as in the Oseberg Viking ship found in western Norway.

WHERE CAN ONE OBTAIN SEED OF PLANT'S TODAY?

Thanks to Lena Ivarsson's book, there has been a bit of a renaissance in the use of *Habitzia* as an edible over the last 10 years in Sweden. It is, however, really still a small group of enthusiasts who are keeping this old and unique Nordic tradition alive. Lena told me that the originally obtained seed through the Swedish seed exchange run by Sällskapet Tjädgårdsmästarna (STA – literally Amateur Gardening Society) around 1995.

Plants are normally propagated by seed, or by carefully dividing the roots. I could have offered readers seed myself, but there was very poor seed-set on my plants last autumn (I have heard of this problem also from others and some think that *Habitzia* is self-sterile, but that doesn't seem to be correct). The scarcity of seed and propagation material does slow down the potential spread of this wonderful edible. It is probably easiest to get hold of seed (at least for a Scandinavian) through one of the associations working for the preservation of heritage seeds or through Swedish gardening fora. Two Swedish seed houses have offered seed in the past, but neither can offer seed this year (sorry folks!). Danish Seed Savers (www.frosesamer.dk, in Danish) had a few seed available for the first time last year – from plants deriving from seed originally sourced from me – and the Swedish organisation Svan (www.forsening.se, in Swedish) might also have seed. I have located a source of wild seed in the Caucasus, but at the time of writing I don't know if I can offer any interested PM readers seed.

In conclusion, it seems to me that possibly the best perennial spinach plant for temperate climates is currently almost completely unknown outside of Scandinavia. It hasn't even an English common name today. Caucasian Spinach, Scandinavian Spinach or simply *Habitzia* are all candidates.

Stephen has now managed to source a limited quantity of wild collected seeds from the Northern (Kamian) part of the Caucasus. He has enough seed to for 20 readers. He will ration it to 5 seeds per person and will ask £5 including postage from Norway. The seed is probably best sown in the autumn and given the cold treatment. It should then germinate in the following spring. Email him for details: StephenB@roadpark.no

Do you know an unusual edible plant that deserves wider broadcast? Please write Permaculture Magazine, The Sustainability Centre, East Moon, Hampshire GU32 1HR or email info@permaculture.co.uk with your candidate.



Caucasian spinach - the unknown woodlander (Stephen)

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