

Hablitzia tamnoides

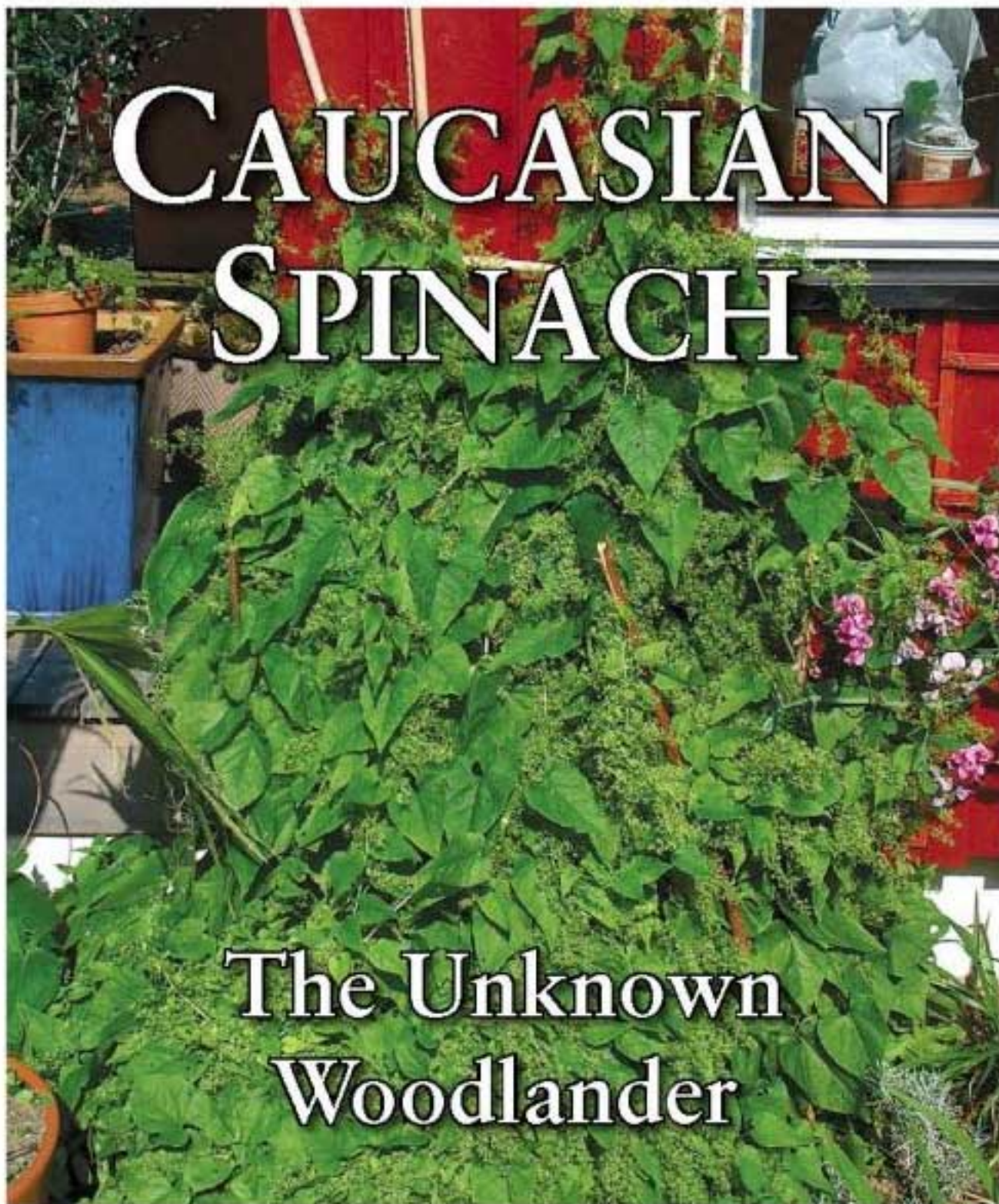
Skrevet av Stephen

onsdag 14. november 2007 12:03 - Sist oppdatert lørdag 28. november 2009 16:08



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Stephens artikkel i "Permaculture Magazine"



Stephen Barstow, our extreme salad man from Norway (see *PM50*), introduces Caucasian Spinach (*Hablitzia tamnoides*)

and asks why this foremost temperate perennial

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Hablitzia tamnoides

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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 *Hablitzia* was also grown, or at least trialled successfully, in Norway in the late 19th century, even in the very far north of the country in Finnmark, vouching 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 *Hablitzia* 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 relict populations of individual plants have survived to the present day in several places in Sweden, southern Norway and Finland (see *How Noddies*).

Stratification (cold treatment) seems to help the germination of *Hablitzia* 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 it 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. Otherwise, it doesn't seem to demand very fertile conditions and with growth moisty

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 (rain-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, pizzas, Indian and oriental dishes etc.

Botanically, *Hablitzia* 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

in herb gardens, but poor in comparison with *Hablitzia* 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 Fatrute Orach (*Atriplex hortensis*), 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 Chesberg Viking ship found in western Norway.

WHERE CAN ONE OBTAIN SEED OR PLANTS TODAY?

Thanks to Lena Iversen's book, there has been a bit of a renaissance in the use of *Hablitzia* 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 she originally obtained seed through the Swedish seed exchange run by Sällskapet Hållgårdssamfundet (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 *Hablitzia* 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 (crop failure!). Danish Seed Sovers (www.forsnings.dk, in Danish) had a few seed available for the first time last year - from plants deriving from seed originally sowed from me - and the Swedish organisation Sesam (www.forsnings.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 *Hablitzia* are all candidates.

Stephen has now managed to source a limited quantity of wild collected seeds from the Northern (Russian) 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: Stephen@Broadpark.no

Do you know an unusual edible plant that deserves wider broadcast? Please write *Permaculture Magazine*, The Sustainability Centre, East Meon, Hampshire GU12 1HR or email info@permaculture.co.uk with your candidate.

