

Plant of the Month - January

by Allan Carr

Tetragonia tetragonoides

New Zealand spinach, warrigal greens

Pronunciation: tet-ra-GO-nee-a tet-ra-go-NOY-dees

AIZOACEAE

Derivation: *Tetragonia*, from the Greek, tetra – four and gonos – angled (referring to the fruit shape of some species); *tetragonoides*, *oides* – like (resembling the genus *Tetragonia* as the species was originally placed in the genus, *Demidovia* so it was firstly known as *Demidovia tetragonoides*).



Leaves, flowers



Flower, minutely warty stem

Tetragonia is a genus of about 55 species worldwide, 7 of which are found in Australia across all states.

Description: *T. tetragonoides* is a prostrate, spreading annual or biennial herb with fleshy stems and foliage that is minutely warty. It spreads to about 2 m and is found in coastal areas of eastern Australia as well as the Brigalow belt. In 1769 this plant was discovered on the New Zealand coast by the botanists on Cook's first voyage in the *Endeavour*. They used it as a fresh vegetable to help prevent scurvy and were pleased to find it on the coast of NSW as well. Seeds were taken back to England where it became what is still a summer vegetable known as 'tetragon'. It was widely used as a spinach substitute in the early years of European settlement here.

Leaves are alternate, diamond-shaped or lance-shaped to 100 mm x 50 mm smooth above and minutely warty below.

When used for food, the leaves should be washed, chopped or rolled up and sliced finely, before blanching them for a minute in boiling water which is then discarded. After cooling they should be cooked normally. Butter, salt and pepper is all that's needed for a delicious vegetable, but these leaves are also good added to a creamy pasta sauce, a risotto or quiche.

They contain oxalates which are poisonous but this occurs in all green leaves and we already eat plants containing it. The amount in these leaves is roughly the same as in spinach, and a little less than in silver beet.

Flowers to 5 mm across with 4 or 5 petals are greenish-yellow occurring singly or in pairs at the leaf bases throughout most of the year but mainly from September to February.

Fruits to 10 mm across are woody, 4 to 6 winged and reddish-black with numerous light brown seeds. Habit, immature fruits

