

The Sidmouth Beach Garden

Sidmouth in Bloom (SIB) are developing an area of beach where the storm tides rarely reach and beach plants have already started to colonise. They have taken over management of the site from East Devon DC and persuaded them not to kill off all the vegetation with weedkiller. Plants such as the sea beet, tree mallow, horned poppy and rock samphire are already colonising the site and the aim is to increase the biodiversity by introducing other native beach plants that have not yet reached the site. **Devon Plant Heritage Group** is backing the project by helping to grow beach plants from seed sourced from other parts of the county. Our aim is to encourage proper beach plant communities to develop on our beach.

Why should we encourage these plants to grow on the beach?

Beach, dune and saltmarsh plant habitats are relatively rare and the plant communities that grow in them are highly specialised. These habitats are being reduced as more and more development occurs around the coastline and they are also under threat due to climate change and rising sea levels. By their nature beaches form relatively unstable and transient habitats that can be easily destroyed by severe storms or damaged by oil spills etc. Storms, acting together with longshore drift can remove large areas of shingle from one area destabilising or removing the local beach plant community, and depositing the shingle elsewhere where it may block off estuaries and saltmarshes. Once the sea is prevented from washing into a saltmarsh the marsh will lose salinity and change to a freshwater environment.

Most beach plants are capable of growing in a more stable land environment but do not succeed there as they cannot compete against more aggressive land species. Thus some of them like the sea wormwood (*Artemisia maritima*) will grow readily in good garden soil, but like most garden plants will only survive if the gardener continues to weed out more aggressive competitors that would normally take over the site. Some of these coastal plants are relatively tender and cannot survive the harsh frosts of inland. Plants like the rock samphire (*Crithmum maritimum*) tend to grow in sea walls, rocky crevices in cliffs or very close to the sea where the warmth from the sea or the shelter lessens the chance of freezing. Most of the plants have a high tolerance to salt water which allows them to grow in an environment which would be hostile to the more competitive land plants.

What role do these plants play in our heritage?

Many of our domesticated food plants have been derived from beach plants, thus the various leaf beets, beetroot and sugar beet have evolved from the sea beet, and carrots, parsnips, peas, brassicas, asparagus, turnips and radishes are

derived from wild beach plants or close relatives. Rocket is a beach plant that is now widely cultivated for salads, whilst seakale and some of the saltmarsh plants are grown or collected as gourmet foods. In particular the Saltwort (*Salsola kali*), known as Agretti in Italy, is cultivated or harvested from the wild across southern Europe and a closely related beach plant is harvested and eaten in Japan. Glasswort (various *Salicornia* species) are collected around our coasts as Marsh Samphire.

How can I help?

Please help to maintain and encourage the growth of our native beach plants and discourage vandalism at this or other beach plant sites across the country.

You may wish to help to maintain this or other planted areas around Sidmouth by contacting Sidmouth in Bloom (SIB). (Lynette or Peter 01395 578081)

If you are interested in plants and gardening you could join Plant Heritage. This UK wide organisation that runs the National Plant Collections scheme operates at a local county level. It organises garden events and offers discounted entries to many gardens (often not open to the public) across the country and to the National Collections. The Devon group is the largest local group and is offering discounted membership during spring 2013. Pick up the leaflets for details (John 01395 578689, or Penny/David 01363 866401.

If you are interested in local flora and fauna a Biodiversity Group is being formed within Vision Group for Sidmouth. See their website for details or contact Louise 01395 512536 louisewoolley@hotmail.co.uk

There are also various Beach clean-up parties such as Sidcomb (organised by SIB) or by other bodies such as Vision Group for Sidmouth, Sustainable Ottery etc., which can be good fun and a chance to meet like-minded individuals.

Finally

It is important that we educate children and visitors in the role of beach plants in our heritage and that we help these plants to survive in their very transient environment.

Dr John D Twibell, Chairman – Devon Group of Plant Heritage