

Alaria

Alariaceae

Alaria is derived from Latin *ala* (wing) with reference to the winged base of this seaweed's fronds.

Seaweeds are not plants. A few are included among these *Plant Biographies* as most of us assume they are; but botanists talk of, for instance, 'plant-like' marine, freshwater or terrestrial algae or organisms. Widely available information on seaweeds can appear to be complicated – not only because of the unfamiliar terminology, or their differing growth and development over millenia (especially that of red seaweeds) but also the ongoing academic debate as ever increasing understanding of these algae continues to emerge. An example of this at the time of writing is a possible controversial placement of red seaweeds in their own kingdom as they have three life cycle stages compared, so far, with any other known organism on earth.

What is sometimes referred to in the West today as the Old World ie. Eastern Asian, South-eastern Asian and Middle Eastern countries, has been familiar with so much of seaweeds' attributes for thousands of years and has enjoyed them particularly but not least as a source of healthy, nutritional food and beneficial medicine. In contrast in the West aside from local coastal forays for food, medicine or agricultural fertiliser, it is only in the last few centuries that seaweeds have begun to be appreciated and valued.

Globally there are believed to be more than 7200 red species, roughly 2000 brown species and over 1800 green seaweed species. Further scientific qualifications divide these into families and genera, dependent upon factors such as biochemical composition, and structural differences, etc. Algae range in size from microscopic plankton to the massive giant kelp *Macrocystis pyrifera* which can form dense 'forests' with fronds that can exceed 148 feet (45 metres) in length. (Neither plankton nor the giant kelp have been included as yet in *Plant Biographies*.) Apparently estimates indicate that there are ten times more marine seaweeds and other algae than land plants.

Seaweeds have become fashionable widely, particularly during the 20th Century and early 21st Century in the West not least as a source of food, medicine and fertiliser. More and more of their properties are beginning to be appreciated and extracts from various seaweeds are used on an industrial scale in an incredible number of products and applications – of which most of us are unaware.