

Tetragonia tetragonoides

[Synonyms : *Demidovia tetragonoides*, *Tetragonia expansa*]

NEW ZEALAND SPINACH is a climbing annual or perennial. Native to the Pacific (from Australia to Japan and New Zealand) and to South America, it has small greenish-yellow flowers.

It is also known as Botany bay greens, *Čtyřboč rozložitá* (Czech), Ice plant, *Kabak* (Javanese), *Kokihi* (Maori), *Neuseeländerspinat* (German), *Nyzeeländsk spenat* (Swedish), Summer spinach, Tasmanian ice plant, *Tétragone* (French), and Warrigal cabbage.

Warning – the leaves are poisonous if eaten raw in large amounts.

Tetragonioides is made up of the genus name *Tetragonia* and Greek *-oides* (like) components meaning in this case ‘a standard example of that genus’.

Sir Joseph Banks (1744-1820) an English botanist who was one of the scientists who travelled with Captain James Cook (1728-1779) on his 1771 world voyage, brought new zealand spinach seeds back to Europe from New Zealand. These reached the Botanic Gardens at Kew in 1772. At that point nobody realised that the cooked leaves were edible (unless picked when young and tender when it can be eaten raw) but in 1809 it was suggested for cultivation as a vegetable. Ten years later it was being grown in both England and France and was also appearing in North America – where recently it has rediscovered some popularity.

Bearing in mind the foregoing it is fascinating to note an anachronism in a popular classic written by Alexandre Dumas (1824-1895) the celebrated French writer. Although published in 1844 his *Les Trois Mousquetaires* takes place when Louis XIII (1601-1643) was on the French throne and the fictional D'Artagnan upon whom most of the attention is focused is offered a dish of *tetragon* – over one hundred years before it had been discovered by western Europeans. One wonders whether Dumas had especially enjoyed the vegetable for him to make this mistake as its popularity in France can only be traced back to the period just before his own birth.