Acknowledgement

The South African National Botanical Institute is herewith acknowledged.

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http://www.plantzafrica.com/frames/searchfram.htm

Devil's claw

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2009

Printed and published by:

Department of Agriculture

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Agriculture, forestry & fisheries
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Scientific name: *Harpagophytum procumbens*

Common names: Wood spider, grapple plant, devil's claw, Sengaparile

Background

Devil's claw is a perennial, herbaceous plant. The name is derived from the herb's unusual fruit, which seem to be covered with numerous small hooks. Devil's claw is a prostrate, mat-forming plant and it is considered as a weed. It belongs to the family Pedaliaceae. Two species of devil's claw occur in South Africa, *H. procumbens* and *H. zeyheri*. Devil's claw is a native plant of Southern Africa (eastern and south eastern parts of Namibia, Southern Botswana, the Kgalagadi region and South Africa). In South Africa, it grows in the North West and Northern Cape provinces, and in the western Free State.

Climate and soil requirements

Devil's claw grows well in temperatures of between 17 and 30 °C. It grows best on well-drained deep, red, light sandy to rocky soils. The plants can withstand slight frost.

Uses

Devil's claw has been recommended for treating a wide range of ailments, including diseases of the liver, kidneys and bladder as well as allergies, artherosclerosis, lumbago, gastrointestinal disturbances, menstrual difficulties, neuralgia, headache, climacteric problems, heartburn, nicotine poisoning and especially rheumatism and arthritis. It can bring relief from pain arising from a range of joint and muscular problems, including gout, backpain, fibrositis and rheumatoid arthritis. Traditionally the devil's claw plant has been used as a tonic, to reduce fevers, to treat pain, during and after labour and as an ointment for sores, ulcers and boils.

Cultural practice

Soil preparation

Planting of devil's claw seed requires loosening of the top quarter of soil with a rake and clearing all other vegetation on the ground in a strip of 3 m wide. When the soil is too compacted, preparation for planting by digging and turning the soil to a depth of approximately 8 cm is required. After preparation of the soil, the bed should be levelled with a rake to create an even surface on which to sow the seeds.

Planting

Devil's claw can be planted in late spring or early summer. The seeds should be scattered evenly over the prepared beds or should be sown in a furrow of 20 cm deep and 60 cm wide. After sowing, the seeds can be raked up lightly and covered with a thin layer of soil. The small tubers should be planted 10 cm deep and 50 cm apart. Seed planted too deeply can result in poor germination.

Propagation

The plant is propagated from seeds or planted secondary tubers.

Irrigation

The seeds should be irrigated daily with a fine mist sprayer, keeping the bed evenly moist until the seedlings emerge. After emergence, irrigation should be applied every second day, keeping a careful watch on the small plants and not allowing these to dry out. As temperatures drop, the frequency can be extended. Frequency of irrigation depends on the temperature and soil. Once the plants are showing four to five leaves and are well established, further irrigation once or twice a week will be sufficient. For maximum seed production, continue irrigating until the flowers stop blooming.

Fertilisation

A lime fertiliser or compost is needed.

Pest control

The only pests of concern are animals feeding on the tubers, e.g. porcupines and antelope such as duiker and steenbok. Birds are attracted to freshly seeded wildflower beds. In areas that are small (e.g. the beds) bird netting can be used and a mulch of dried leaves or shredded palm fronds can be spread over the bed. The mulch should be removed immediately once the seedlings appear.

Disease control

Overwatering could lead to fungus problems. Registered fungicides can be used.

Harvesting methods

Only the secondary root tubers are harvested and the primary root is saved for replanting. Harvesting can be done by hand or cutting the fresh root tubers to slices using stainless steel knife or digging stick and clean cutting board used exclusively for this purpose.