



Acanthus mollis

Acanthus mollis, commonly known as **bear's breeches**, **sea dock**, **bearsfoot** or **oyster plant** is a herbaceous perennial plant with an underground rhizome in the genus *Acanthus*. It is regarded as an invasive species in some jurisdictions.

Etymology

The name of the genus derives from the Greek name of the plant ἄκανθος *ákanthos*; it was imitated in Corinthian capitals. This ἄκανθος *ákanthos* is related to ἄκανθα *ákanth* meaning "thorn" referring to the thorn-bearing sepals, or any thorny or prickly plant in Greek. The Latin name of the species, *mollis* meaning "soft, smooth", refers to the texture of the leaves.

Description

Acanthus mollis reaches on average 30–80 cm (12–31 in) of height, with a maximum of 180 cm (71 in), inflorescence included. It has basal clusters of deeply lobed and cut, shiny dark green leaves, soft to the touch, up to 40 cm (16 in) long and 25 cm (9.8 in) broad, with a long petiole. The inflorescence is a cylindrical spike 30–40 cm (12–16 in) long and can produce up to 120 flowers. The flowers are tubular, whitish, and lilac or rose in colour. Each flower is up to 5 cm (2.0 in) long and it is surrounded by three green or purplish bracts. The central bract is spiny and larger than the other two. The calyx has two lips: the upper is purple on top, rather long and forms a kind of "helmet" on top of the corolla. The corolla is reduced to a white lower lip, trilobed, with purple-pink venation. The four stamens are fused to the corolla and look like tiny brushes. This species flowers in late spring or early summer, from May through August.

Reproduction

Acanthus mollis is entomophilous and it is pollinated only by bees or bumble bees large enough to force their way between the upper sepal and the lower, so that they can reach the nectar at the bottom of the tube. The fruit is an ovoid capsule containing two to four large black seeds. The dispersal of seeds is by the wind.

These plants are usually propagated from tubers and tend to form large, localized clumps which can survive for several decades and look statuesque when well-grown, but its suitability as a garden plant is lessened on account of its invasive nature (new plants are produced readily both from seed and portions of root) and its susceptibility to powdery mildew and attacks from snails.

Distribution

This plant is native to the Mediterranean region from Portugal and northwest Africa east to Croatia and it is one of the earliest cultivated species.

Habitat

This garden plant is also quite common in the wild. It grows in dry areas, roadsides and wastelands, especially in rocky and bushy places. It is tolerant of drought and shade and generally does not exceed an altitude of 300 metres (980 ft) above sea level.

Culture

The shape of the *Acanthus* leaf of this plant inspired the ancient Greek sculptor Callimachus (5th c. BCE) to model the capital (crown) of the Corinthian column. Since then, the Corinthian order column has been used extensively in Greco-Roman architecture. Virgil describes Helen of Troy as wearing a dress embroidered with *acanthus* leaves.