

Native trees and shrubs, a neglected side of the wild flora

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In floristic and vegetational science, ligneous plants are a neglected taxonomical group. For centuries, many kinds of trees and shrubs have been planted, cultivated and traded. With regard to biodiversity and gene-conservation, an understanding of the original native flora of ligneous plants is very important. In The Netherlands in 1992, the Department of Agriculture, Nature-Conservation and Fishery started the Genetic Quality project. The intention of this project is to create comprehension of indigenous material of trees and shrubs still present, their decline, protection and possible harvest and use.

Determining the original, native quality of a tree or ligneous plant is not an easy task. As definition of indigenous plants we follow H.M. Heybroek (*Behoud en ontwikkeling van het genetisch potentieel van onze bomen en struiken*. Wageningen, 1992): 'Indigenous is plant material which since its spontaneous settlement after the last ice-age has always reproduced itself locally, or has been rejuvenated artificially using strictly local material.'

The used working procedure assumes several criteria which can be used both for the plant itself and for its growing location. The procedure is used to assign the probability of indigenous quality. A first test is a topographic map (scale 1:50-000 or 1:25-000), dating from 1850 or earlier. Landscape features existing on both the old map and on a recent map are possible locations of indigenous material. Usually, these features date back much further than the map itself. It is important to establish whether the landscape feature truly is old. In this respect, herbs and ligneous plants characteristic of old woods are useful indicators, as well as the local history of the wood, found in old archives. Examples are coppice woods and coppice standards.

Between 1992 and 1996 stocktaking has been done for several regions in The Netherlands. This research revealed the repression to which native ligneous plants are exposed. Nearly half of the approximately 100 native ligneous plants (blackberries excluded) are endangered, rare or extinct.