

Plant of the month: *Lavatera arborea* L.

Class: Dicotyledonae

Subclass: Dilleniidae

Order: Malvales

Family: Malvaceae

Common Name: tree mallow

Flowering time (N.Z.): August - May

Flowers: lilac or deep purple with purple or red lines and base

Fruit: 6-8 (9) mericarps per fruit

Status: Naturalized

Origin: West and South Europe and North Africa

Lavatera arborea L. the tree mallow is one of five species of *Lavatera* naturalized in New Zealand. In both its native range and here in New Zealand it is generally a coastal plant. Around Dunedin it can be easily found at St. Clair and Ocean Grove beaches. According to the Flora, volume IV 'This robust species is most easily distinguished by the fused, enlarged, spreading, fruiting calyx.'

The genus contains c. 45 spp. Though my Mabberley notes that the 'curious disjunct distribution may reflect weak taxonomy' with members of the genus (c. 25 in Mabberley) originating in Macaronesia, Mediterranean to NW Himalayas, Central Asia, Australia and California. The genus is closely related to the marsh mallow genus (*Althaea*) which contains both the edible marsh mallow (*Althaea officinalis*) and the common garden flower, hollyhock (*Althaea rosea*).

Sources:

Webb et al. 1980. *Flora of New Zealand* Vol. IV, Government Printer, Wellington.

Mabberley, D.J. 1997. *The Plant-book – A portable dictionary of the vascular plants*. 2nd Edition. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Blamey, M and Grey-Wilson, C. 1993. *Mediterranean wild flowers*. Harper Collins, Jersey.