

WEED ALERT

TREE MALLOW INVADERS ISLANDS

A plant brought to Australia to be a feature of coastal gardens is causing severe problems on islands around the world. Tree mallow, *Malva dendromorpha* (called *Lavatera arborea* in *Western Weeds*), is a stout branched biennial with lilac flowers, that loves growing on limestone, especially where the soil has been enriched by the guano left by seabirds. It threatens to outcompete local mallow species, and to make areas unsuitable for ground-nesting seabirds.

In the UK, tree mallow is threatening one of Britain's best-loved seabirds, the puffin. This fat, colourful little bird has a sad clown's face with a large red and yellow bill. It feeds on a variety of fish and nests in a burrow on islands. But at least one important nesting site, Craighleith near North Berwick, is now covered with impenetrable thickets of tree mallow, leading

to a reduction in burrows from 28,000 in 1999 to 14,000 in 2004. And the plant is increasing on other islands too ... Tree mallow has long been recorded as a casual around Britain's coast – why has it suddenly increased in numbers and started to cause a problem? It would appear that global warming is to blame, making the temperature much more suitable for the plant (2005 was the Northern Hemisphere's hottest year on record).

Tree mallow is originally from the Mediterranean. It is a handsome plant, resembling a hollyhock but larger and more bushy. In the Perth area it can be seen on coastal wasteland and some of the Safety Bay islands. It is causing a problem because it displaces (and in at least one instance, hybridizes with) our native coastal tree mallow, *Malva australiana* (*Lavatera pleibea* var. *tomentosa* in *Western Weeds*) a white-flowered plant that also likes to grow in guano. Tree mallow is also threatening island endemic mallows off the Californian coast.

So far, tree mallow has not been found north, on the Lancelin to Dongara islands, nor has it been found on South Coast islands. However, it could appear! It is recommended that any new occurrences be destroyed and old infestations be eradicated. So, if you are on the coast and you see a tall (to 3 m) hollyhock-like plant with pinky-purple flowers, please note the location, take a clear photograph and let the land manager (eg CALM or Shire) and LFW know. It is much easier to control potential problem plants while they are in small numbers.



Tree mallow on the Albany foreshore.

Penny Hussey