

# Vladimir Leontjevich Komarov (1869 – 1945)

Vladimir Leontjevich Komarov was born in the Russian City of St Petersburg on 13 October 1869. Although from a military family, he pursued a career in science. In 1890, after leaving the gymnasium in St Petersburg, he entered the natural history faculty of St Petersburg University, and graduated with a first-class diploma in 1894. He decided then to specialise in botany, but retained his interest in other disciplines. As a student he studied the works of Charles Darwin, and he was keenly interested in human anatomy courses for trainee teachers of physical education and sport. In 1899 he became involved in the St Petersburg botanic gardens and the botanical museum.

In 1902 he presented his thesis for a master's degree in botany, and in 1911 was conferred his doctorate in botany at the Moscow University. His major work was on the flora of far eastern Kamchatka and Mongolia, but he also made exhaustive descriptions of the vegetation of other vast regions: Sayany and western Baikal, Siberia and Yakut. His interest extended to the evolution of plants and their speciation, and the meridional zoning of flora and vegetation cover. In the course of his field studies and later promotional work he travelled to the farthest territories of the USSR.

His publications included textbooks and popular science books on botany, and a series of original works about the founders of the science of plants. He initiated and edited *Flora of the USSR*, which appeared in 30 volumes plus index, between 1933 and 1964, with ongoing English translations

becoming available from 1963. In 1915 he co-founded the Russian Botanical Society. Elected a corresponding member of the USSR Academy of Sciences in 1914 and a full member in 1920, he was vice-president and then president for fifteen years, from 1930 to 1945, and was instrumental in establishing scientific centres in outlying districts of the Soviet Union, and branches of the USSR Academy of Sciences in the Soviet republics.

His lifetime of 76 years spanned three Czarist governments and the establishment of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), and encompassed political assassinations, revolution, civil war and two world wars. In 1940 the Botanical Institute of the USSR Academy of Sciences was renamed in honour of the "grand old man" of Russian botany. An ardent patriot, he was awarded the Stalin Prize twice, in 1941 and 1942, for his contribution to the scientific advancement of his country. Later, the village of Kelomyaki near St Petersburg was renamed Komarovo and a memorial plaque was installed on its railway station. In St Petersburg there are memorial plaques at 2 Professora Popova Street, where he lived from 1913 to 1935 before his move to Moscow, and on the administration building of the world famous botanical gardens on Aptekarsky Island.

A New Zealand willowherb, which has become a naturalised garden weed in a few places in the British Isles, Europe and North America, was named *Epilobium komarovianum* when described in 1908 by his French contemporary, Augustin Abel Hector Léveillé.

## ***Epilobium komarovianum***

Commonly known as willowherbs, *Epilobium* (in the Onagraceae family) have long capsules, topped at first by white or pink notched petals and later splitting into four to release tiny tufted seeds. Of about 200 mainly temperate species in the genus, about 40 are native to New Zealand. *Epilobium komarovianum* is an endemic small, shortly creeping perennial herb. The leaves are opposite, bronze or copper-coloured, and dimpled between the vein ridges, usually 3–4 mm diameter and often close-set. White flowers appear from November to February, followed by capsules on very short stalks. Coastal to subalpine in turf on banks or around lakes and tarns, flushes and seepages, it occurs in North, South, Stewart and Chatham islands.

