

# Nice fruit if you can get it

When a new collection of a familiar garden plant is brought into cultivation, it may have qualities that were previously underestimated, as **Roy Lancaster** discovers at Crûg Farm Plants in Wales. Photography by Jane Sebire

**A COMMON QUESTION** asked by those gardeners with a penchant for unusual fruits concerns the secret of persuading climbers such as *Akebia* (chocolate vine), to perform. In fact, there are many other hardy woody climbers whose fruits, ornamental as well as edible, are commonly a distinctly hit-and-miss affair in British gardens. One of the best collections of climbers that do fruit reliably is to be found at Crûg Farm Plants in North Wales. Here owners Bleddyn and Sue Wynn-Jones cultivate in their garden and nursery a substantial range of species, many of which have been grown from seed that they collected in the wild. Thus I found myself, in March this year, gazing at the distant snow-dusted summit of Snowdon, which is just part of the landscape enjoyed by the Wynn-Joneses from their hilltop home.

Some of these exciting climbers are well established outdoors, clothing fences or walls, while others, including several new and untested species, are grown in large containers protected in plastic tunnels from the vagaries of winter weather. Before we toured the collection, Bleddyn explained to me why some of these climbers fail to fruit in our gardens. It is all to do with provenance, sex and growing conditions – in that order. Growing plants originating from higher altitudes or latitudes normally produces individuals that are better suited to our climate. However, in order to do this you need to know the origin of your plants, information that with a few exceptions is not always readily available.

## A complex topic

The sex factor is the most important, and the most complex. Basically, most familiar garden plants have 'perfect' flowers, with both male and female parts (stamens and style). Put simply, those of the climbers in question differ in having male and female parts confined to separate flowers. These may occur on the same (monoecious) or separate plants, in effect a male and a female plant (dioecious), although there are variations. The bottom line is that female flowers need pollinating and fertilising if they are to fruit, so, instances of a non-fruiting plant of a dioecious species may simply mean a suitable 'partner' is required. None of the following climbers are usually grown primarily for fruit, but these exciting introductions from Crûg may change that. ■

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## SUCCESSFUL FRUITING

### The Wynn-Jones' recipe:

- For dioecious species, plant a known male and a female plant together.
- For monoecious species plant two seedlings (clones) together to encourage successful fertilisation.
- Provide good conditions: shelter to protect flowers (from frost) and bees in early spring. A warm, sunny site helps ripen growth and aids fruiting.



## AKEBIA

Both *Akebia trifoliata* (leaves with three leaflets) and *A. quinata* (five leaflets) are grown at Crûg Farm Plants as well as the hybrid between them, *A. x pentaphylla* (also five leaflets). All are hardy, vigorous (indeed, they can be rampant) and deciduous or semi-evergreen. Their star-shaped, fragrant flowers are monoecious, but produced together in pendent clusters (racemes) in early spring. The larger, female flowers are held below, ranging in colour from dark chocolate purple to white; the smaller male flowers produced towards the tip. It is Bleddyn's experience that growing two seedlings together produces better results, which has led him to plant two seedlings in each container for sale. This results in large, pendulous, sausage-shaped fruits (above) freely forming, which ripen in September with a purplish-brown skin. Later this splits to reveal a translucent white, edible but insipid pulp with seeds.



## HOLBOELLIA

From *Lardizabalaceae*, the same family as *Akebia*, comes *Holboellia*, of which the two most commonly grown species are *H. latifolia* and *H. coriacea*. Both are rampant growers once established, and evergreen; *H. latifolia* has three to nine leaflets, the true *H. coriacea*, three to five. The bell-shaped, sweetly-scented flowers are monoecious – long-stalked, purplish-tinted male blooms and larger, cup-shaped, greenish-white or purple tinted female flowers are held in mixed clusters around early summer. At Crûg Farm Plants, *H. latifolia* (grown from seed collected in Nepal) fruits even on three-year-old plants grown up canes in containers. Again, Bleddyn plants two or more seedlings per container to assist in fertilisation. The edible fruits are sausage-shaped, purplish and pulpy (above).

Several other *Holboellia* species are also sold by Crûg Farm Plants, including *H. angustifolia* and its elegant subspecies *linearifolia* with narrower leaflets. *Holboellia brachyandra* is like a larger-leaved and flowered version of *H. coriacea*, native to southern Yunnan and northern Vietnam.



## STAUNTONIA

Closely related to *Holboellia* is *Stauntonia hexaphylla*, also from the Far East, which has leaves of three to seven entire, leathery, evergreen leaflets. (This species is often wrongly sold as *Holboellia coriacea*.) The fragrant flowers are monoecious, borne in pendent clusters in early spring: the smaller males have six narrow, cream-coloured, recurved segments and stamens united in a column. The plant sold by Crûg is self-compatible (needing no cross-pollination), producing egg-shaped, edible fruits (above) that age to purple-pink and which here are held on the plant through to midwinter.

A recently available and equally vigorous plant collected by Dan Hinkley from northern Vietnam is a species with affinity to *Stauntonia chinensis*, the name of which has yet to be confirmed. It bears yellow fruits, and Bleddyn believes it will be hardy on a warm sunny wall. Also available and proving hardy is *S. purpurea*, with smaller purple flowers and fruits.

All species mentioned here are monoecious, but there are others that can be dioecious.



## SCHISANDRA

*Schisandra* are deciduous or evergreen twining climbers and, in Bleddyn's experience, all dioecious except monoecious *S. chinensis*. Perhaps the most striking in bloom is *S. rubriflora* with clusters of long-stalked, deep crimson, cup-shaped flowers in spring. Crûg Farm Plants also offers a hybrid between *S. rubriflora* and *S. grandiflora* producing pink flowers.

The best for general cultivation, in Bleddyn's opinion, is *S. grandiflora* with white to pale pink, scented flowers of which they offer the selections 'Jamu' (male) and 'Lahlu' (female). As in other species, the females, when fertilised, develop pendulous spikes of red berries (above), spectacular in autumn. They have medicinal properties and have been used in the West in health drinks.

**i** **Crûg Farm Plants**, Griffith's Crossing, Caernarfon, Gwynedd LL55 1TU. 01248 670232; www.crug-farm.co.uk

**?** **Have you fruited these climbers?** If so, please write to: *The Garden*, 4th Floor, Churchgate, New Road, Peterborough PE1 1TT. Email: thegarden@rhs.org.uk