

## Lapageria rosea – Chilean Bellflower

### Propagation

Lapageria seeds which are dried and stored before sowing often become dormant and benefit from a period of cold and moisture before they are sown. This process, known as pre-chilling may have already been partially carried out before you receive the seed. Seeds straight from the packet may also need to be soaked before sowing. Examine the seeds, which are lemon yellow and look like tiny eggs, for any sign of a root showing through, if you can see the start of root growth then you will not need to soak. If they have not started to sprout then soak them for three days in cold water, changing the water three to five times during that period.

After soaking moisten a small quantity of peat - it is imperative that it is of the right moisture content, neither too wet, nor too dry. It needs to be just a shade dryer than it would be if you were going to use it for seed sowing. Mix the seeds and peat together and place in the corner of a small polythene bag. Then roll up the bag into a tight package so that the peat and seeds are in close contact with each other and there are no air spaces and seal with sticky tape. Place the package into a domestic refrigerator where the temperature is 3-5°C for 1-3 months. The seeds need to be chilled but not frozen.

You will need to examine the package occasionally and eventually you will see a small root protruding from each seed. Once this has become twice as long as the seed, approximately 7mm the chilled seeds can be removed from the bag and potted up.

### POTTING UP

After germination the most difficult part of the Lapageria life cycle is getting the seedlings established into pots. It is essential that the roots are in moist compost which also drains freely and often they will sulk for long periods after transplanting. This is apparently because the soil becomes sour before the roots are vigorous enough to explore it thoroughly. Free drainage is therefore essential and a potting mixture of a standard ericaceous compost containing peat and sand with one part of vermiculite added to every five of compost, plus a little charcoal is recommended. This will help to ensure that at no time the soil becomes waterlogged or the roots deprived of air.

After potting up into 7.5cm pots, give a light mist spray with rainwater and seal each inside a polythene bag which can be left in place until the seedlings are growing well. Place them in a well lit spot, avoiding bright sunshine and water with care until the growth becomes apparent. At this stage temperature does not seem to be critical and the seedlings should be kept at around 13-15°C in a humid atmosphere.

## AN ALTERNATIVE METHOD

As already mentioned, the seedlings once pricked out can sometimes 'sulk' for a long period or even die if conditions are not quite right. The moist paper method is one way which has proved successful in providing the right conditions for the seedlings to grow away with the same vigour which they display at germination.

In the laboratory the seedlings are transferred to moist filter paper which is always kept at a steady 20°C. They are in full light and high humidity and growth is much more vigorous in these conditions than from seedlings pricked out in the normal way.

These conditions can be easily duplicated in the home using a butter/margarine container or similar container preferably with a clear plastic lid. Cleanliness is essential, scald the plastic before use and use only cold boiled water (rainwater in hard water areas) at all stages of development. First fill the container one third full with moistened kitchen towel to provide a moist flat surface on which to place the seeds.

After removing the chilled seeds from the fridge rinse them carefully to wash off all traces of peat and place them as far apart as possible on the moist kitchen towel. Replace the lid and leave the container in a well lit spot, out of full sunlight and in a temperature of 19-21°C. Examine regularly and wash off any fungus which may form on the seeds. After about a month or a little more they will have developed a slender stem like a tiny asparagus spear and then a relatively large shiny green leaf. At this stage they can be potted up as described above but increasing the vermiculite to one part by volume for every two of compost for the first potting.

## AFTERCARE

The seedlings are best kept in pots in a shaded frame until they are two years old to ensure that they have a good root system. Early spring is the best time for planting. Lapagerias can be grown permanently in pots but much prefer to be planted in a deep bed of moist, perfectly drained soil. When -grown under glass, water liberally from April to September and provide a cool moist atmosphere. Through the winter provide a minimum temperature of 7°C, keep the atmosphere dryer and water only sparingly.

In the warmest parts of the country and in sheltered gardens Lapagerias can be grown successfully on walls and trellises out of doors. They are particularly at home close to the sea and in Cornwall they are often in flower out of doors at Christmas. They produce young shoots from just below the ground and can therefore cope with a small amount of frost but as flowers are produced on the old wood it's best to cover the twining stems temporarily with a cover of Hessian or straw during the hardest weather to protect next seasons blossoms.