

Clitoria ternatea – Butterfly Pea Vine

Clitoria ternatea, commonly known as the Butterfly Pea Vine, is a fast growing perennial climber. Native to Southern and Central Africa, it is now established and grown both as an ornamental or a high-yielding forage crop in tropical, sub-tropical and warm temperate climates world-wide. Botanically it is best described in general terms as is a vigorous, strongly persistent, herbaceous perennial legume with a fine twining form.

The bright blue flowers with off-white to yellow markings reach some 5cm in length and 4cm in width. Individual flowers tend to be solitary but a good plant can produce numerous blooms creating a very attractive spectacle. Flowering is normally in the summer months but often occurs sporadically throughout the year.

It can take a range of soils from sands through to heavy clays but is extremely well adapted to those awkward heavy clay alkaline soils we all love to hate. It is drought tolerant and has some tolerance for saline soil but performs best with regular watering. This is a warm climate species that takes full sun to dappled shade. It is not frost tolerant and does not do as well in cooler climates.

Horticulturally, this species excels as a fast-growing cover for fences and trellises and can be a useful quick screen. It makes an excellent hanging basket subject. It should not be forgotten that it is a multi-purpose species. As with many legumes it is nitrogen fixing and is now used for short and medium-term pastures and as green manure, a cover crop, a protein bank and as a useful fast revegetation species for degraded sites.

Propagation

Propagation is easy from seed following pre-treatment to break the physical dormancy provided by the impervious seed coat. Pre-treatment can be carried out by abrasion - gently rub the seed between folded sandpaper - or by placing the seed in near boiling water and allowing it to soak overnight as the water cools. The seed retains viability for many years. Cuttings strike well using firm, current season's growth.

Propagation - some information for colder climates.

Scarify the seed or pre-soak it for 24 hours in warm water. Sow spring in a warm greenhouse at 20°C. When they are large enough to handle, prick the seedlings out into individual pots and grow them on in the greenhouse for at least their first winter. Plant them out into their permanent positions in late spring or early summer, after the last expected frosts. Give the plants some protection from the cold for at least its first winter outdoors.