

# The Archibald Archive – Genus Guides

## ASTRAGALUS

This is one of the largest and most complex genera in the pea-family (the Leguminosae, Papilionaceae or Fabaceae depending on which classification you follow). The genus, characteristic of the steppe-vegetation of arid, continental climates, is distributed around the northern hemisphere and extends southward down the Andes of South America. There are representatives in every continent except Australasia. With well over 1500 species the genus is huge but it is hardly known in cultivation. There are about 370 species in North America and 380 in Turkey alone. While most are unlikely to excite gardeners, there are many plants of great potential value for gardeners in cold, dry climates as well as for the skilled specialist alpine-house grower in wetter, temperate areas. While Elizabeth Neese's suggestion that the formation of an 'Astragalus Society' would be appropriate is unlikely to be taken up, they deserve increasing attention from adventurous gardeners.

We periodically list a small range of dwarf species from wild-collected seeds. Our listings are erratic and entirely dependent on whether we or others have been collecting in appropriate areas at the right season for seed-collection. It is still too early in the history of this genus in cultivation for any of us to be able to ensure a supply of cultivated seeds from even a few of the more desirable species. As is so often the case, many of the more beautiful species are not only the more difficult ones to grow but are also difficult to keep in character in cultivation. Among the North American ones, our involvement has been mainly with members of Section Argophylli with their fascinating seed pods. In Turkey and Iran, Section Hymenostegis with its fluffy flower-spikes has been our main interest. These are cutting-edge plants whose horticultural destiny is yet to be realized.

In our experience germination is seldom a problem but chipping and soaking the seeds prior to sowing are often suggested. This will do no harm. We find they usually come up fairly quickly, so delaying sowing till early spring might obviate winter losses. Several species we have introduced have been successfully grown to flowering in the UK and some have even set viable seed. Handling the young seedlings can be more of a problem than germinating the seeds. They all detest root disturbance, so sowing one or two seeds in a small pot might obviate this. Many are also very sensitive to excess moisture both in the growing medium and the atmosphere. In moist climates, optimum soil-drainage and full ventilation are essential for plants grown under glass.

Nomenclature and Further information: The North American species have been impeccably and eruditely covered by R.C. Barneby in his monograph 'Atlas of North American Astragalus', published in two parts in the Memoirs of the New York Botanical Garden. This is a strong contender for the title of the finest botanical monograph ever written. It would take several Rupert Barnebys with several lifetimes to monograph the entire genus. Obviously, we use his nomenclature. For other areas, the accounts in such standard floras as 'Flora Europaea', 'Flora Iranica' and 'Flora of Turkey' have been more than adequate for our modest needs and our rudimentary knowledge of this genus and we use the names in these.. Needless to say, there is no popular, selective account of this genus for gardeners.