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CODONOPSIS

The climbing campanulas

We are sure that this diverse genus of tuberous-rooted perennials in Campanulaceae is destined to become much better appreciated if reliably named material can be made available. They are all summer-growing and winter-dormant. The majority are climbers, twining among scrub or the other herbaceous plants with which they grow. The flowers of many are decidedly subtle rather than spectacular in their colouring and the intricate internal markings of their bells should appeal to those who appreciate genera such as *Fritillaria*. On the other hand, the species in the *C. convolvulacea* complex are among the most strikingly beautiful of all climbing plants. The species, extending eastwards from the Tien Shan in Kazakhstan are almost wholly from eastern Asia. We hope to list an expanding range and we already have a good number species raised from seed from authentic wild sources progressing for the future. Recently, Chris Grey-Wilson has done much to assemble existing botanical information (1990) and to sort out the spectacular *Codonopsis convolvulacea* group (1995). Most gardeners trying to become acquainted with this genus tend to lose interest when they find that the majority of plants or seeds they obtain from most existing sources turn out to be *Codonopsis clematidea*. We cannot yet give a full guarantee that every name we use is perfectly in line with the published information but we shall do so in time.

Seeds sown in winter will usually germinate well in spring. A cold period after sowing does not seem to be necessary for all species but some definitely need this. We have failed to germinate some, such as *C. lanceolata*, if our winter has been too mild. Late sown seed will sometimes come up in autumn, which is inconvenient and means that the seedlings have to be kept growing as long as possible in a protected environment until they eventually go dormant. Though some will flower the first year from seed, it is usually easier to leave the seedlings alone in the seedling container for their first season and to sort out the tubers when they are dormant in winter. Most species are quite easily grown in a rich, well-drained soil with part-shade. The main hazard is damage to the newly emerging young shoots in spring. These are extremely vulnerable to predation by slugs and their removal in spring leads many people to assume that their plants have died over the winter. For this reason we grow the choicer species in containers. Members of the *C. convolvulacea* complex, growing up a few twigs, are among the most beautiful and rewarding plants for the alpine-house in summer.

Nomenclature and Further information: There is no book on this genus and the best easily accessible references are the accounts by Chris Grey-Wilson published in 'The Plantsman' Vol. 12, Part 2, September 1990 and in "The New Plantsman" Vol. 2, Part

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4, December, 1995. If you want a really comprehensive source of reliable information, however, go no further 'The Codonopsis Website' maintained by Paul Kneebone, holder of the British National Collection of this genus : <http://www.kneebone.freemove.co.uk/>. This is an exemplary site and should be the template for every National Collection holder to aspire to. As far as nomenclature goes, Hubert Agback's check list is reproduced there. There is also a comprehensive gallery of first class photographs of the species in Paul's collection. There is not much information on cultivation but, as we have commented above, this is not generally a great problem. The scope of the material grown by Paul makes our own listings look somewhat sad but they still constitute a wider range of seeds than offered anywhere else.