

# Spring Climbers

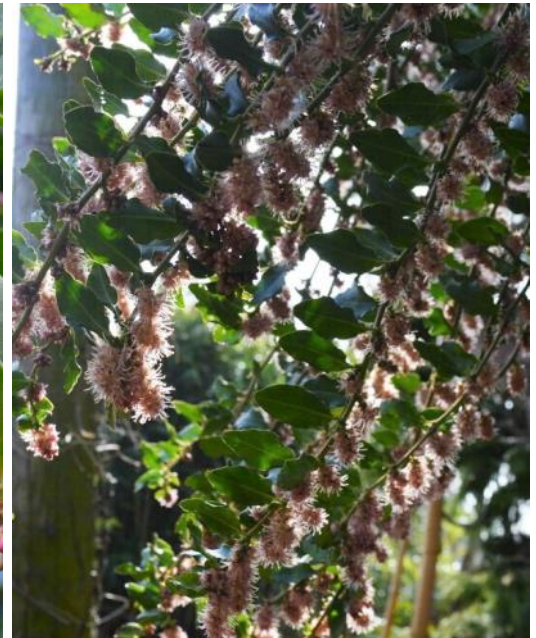
Charlie Pridham of Roseland House Nursery on the heralds of spring



When April arrives with winter largely over but still awaiting the flowering of the Wisteria which for me always heralds a change in the garden from spring to early summer there have already been a number of the climbing plants vying for our attention.

The first of these, an evergreen self-clinging climber from Chile called *Ercilla volubilis* it looks a bit like a pale pink climbing *Ceanothus*, absolutely smothered in the scented fluffy pink flowers. Long recognised as an almost indestructible plant for maritime exposure it has much to recommend it anywhere that an evergreen is required, I use it as a tough windbreak on some trellising and grow late flowering clematis through it for summer colour. Although it has been in this country since 1840 and was given an "Award of Merit" by the RHS in 1975 you still do not see many specimens around which is a shame given its performance, it eventually makes a large woody stemmed climber if left unpruned.

My second star climbers in spring are the *Akebia*. *A. trifoliata* and *A. x pentaphylla* are usually the first to flower and being deciduous show off the chocolate scented flowers well on the bare wood, while *quinata* and the cream form have slightly larger and more showy flowers are inclined to hang onto their old leaves.



"*Ercilla volubilis* looks a bit like a pale pink climbing *Ceanothus*, absolutely smothered in the scented fluffy pink flowers."

Photo: Roseland House



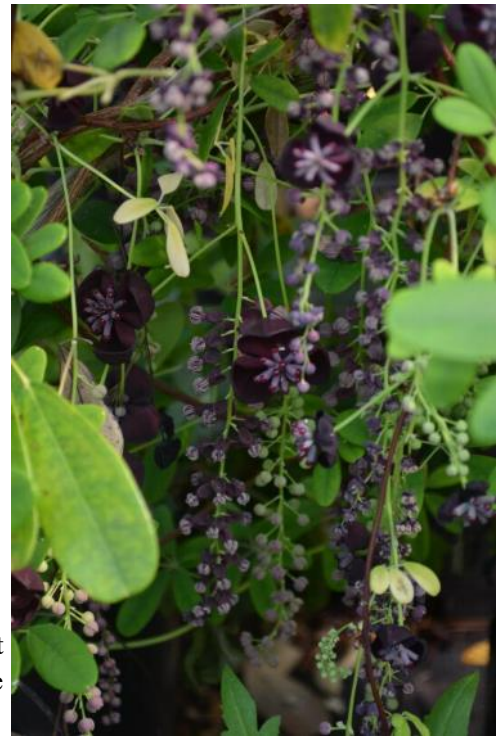
"*Akebia quinata* and the cream form have slightly larger and more showy flowers."

Photo: Roseland House

The star for me is however the more recent introduction of *Akebia longiracemosa* as its name implies much longer racemes of flowers and is a neat evergreen. *Akebia quinata* comes from that area of China and Korea where the two countries join, this is a very cold place in winter and its no surprise to find that *Akebia quinta* is very hardy, however they have short springs in that part of the world while in the UK climate the poor plant is often fooled into flowering as early as February, some while before the danger of frosts is past, with the result that flowers can be frosted off. For reliable flowering a wall is therefore recommended in cold parts, the good news being that it can be a north facing wall as *Akebia* will flower just as well there as anywhere else. Often billed as evergreens *Akebia* will change their leaves as the flowering starts, which actually improves the display as flowers are then more visible and the new foliage is fresh and green. Books will tell you *Akebia* will also fruit but it is rare with just one plant to get pollination in this country despite both male and female flowers being present, the fruit however is rather eye catching (and edible) so its worth doing a bit of hand pollinating. These climbers are all good garden plants and flower all the way down to the ground.

The buds on the Wisteria are a promise of what's soon to come in the garden but its good to have something to fill the gap that will also have good foliage for the rest of the season.

Charlies Pridham with wife Liz runs Roseland House Nursery holds the National Plant Collections of *Clematis Viticella* cultivars and *Lapageria rosea* cultivars.



“*Akebia longiracemosa* has long racemes of flowers and is a neat evergreen”.

Photo: Roseland House