Caring For Schisandra

These are twining, woody deciduous and evergreen climbers from China. Other species come from North America. The flowers are monoecious or dioecious with male and female flowers sometimes appearing on the same plant and sometimes on different plants. The key reason for growing schisandra is that they produce spectacular and unusual cup shaped flowers singly or in clusters in short spikes from the leaf axils in late spring and early summer followed by highly coloured fruits. These plants make excellent wall or fence shrubs requiring little training to get established on wires or a trellis. They are vigorous enough to grow well up other trees or through mature shrubs in a woodland context. Totally hardy too despite the somewhat exotic nature of their flowers.

Schisandra chinensis is usually dioecious with large obovate to oval leaves 3-4in long. The flowers are fragrant and pale pink, cream or white and about ¾in across followed, on female plants, by pendant 6in spikes of long fleshy pink or red fruit. This species can reach 20-30ft in height and flowers in late spring or early summer.

S. grandiflora is a rarer species with leathery leaves and conspicuous veining. The flowers are larger than those of S. chinensis and are white or pink on drooping stalks in May or June. These are followed by scarlet berries.

S. rubrifolia has deep crimson flowers on pendant stalks in late spring and fleshy scarlet fruits. It is closely related to S. grandiflora. The leaves are 5in long and turn a splendid yellow in autumn.

S. sphenanthera is another vigorous species with orange-red or terracotta flowers in May and June. There is a huge plant growing at Cotehele Gardens in Cornwall where its main woody stem is at least 6in in diameter but this remains a relatively unknown species which we have only recently added to our catalogue.
Seeds should be extracted from their fleshy pods when ripe and sown in the autumn. Fresh new growth cuttings in early summer are usually successful. These are not plants for the greenhouse and are not prone to being troubled by any pests or diseases.