

From catalogues it is only possible to make approximate comparisons of the wholesale price of plants, which varied between 58.1 DM for plants at 80 to 100 cm from Gilardelli, to 20 DM for plants at 40 to 60 cm from Liss Forest.

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Notes on the Propagation and Cultivation of *Romneya coulteri*

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INTRODUCTION

Romneya coulteri is native to the Santa Ana Mountains, southeast of Los Angeles, California, where it is said to be abundant. The Irish botanist Dr. Thomas Coulter discovered it in 1833. The generic name commemorates the Irish astronomer Dr. F. Romney Robinson, a friend of Dr. Coulter.

Romneya coulteri was not introduced to the British Isles until 1875, when seeds were received by E. G. Henderson and Co. and by Thompson of Ipswich. The first recorded flowering took place in Ireland where a small plant at the Glasnevin Botanic Garden opened one bud in the autumn of 1876, having been planted in the March of the same year. The following year it flowered abundantly after reaching 1.8 m in height.

PROPAGATION

Although most commonly propagated by root cuttings, *R. coulteri* is very easy to germinate from seed which can be stored for many years without losing its viability. The essential ingredient is petrol to break the seed coat. Wrap the seed in muslin and soak in the petrol for 10 to 15 min before washing thoroughly in soapy water several times. Remember petrol is highly flammable or explosive so take great care. Use a container holding the minimum amount of petrol necessary and keep it well away from sparks or other sources of combustion — remember that petrol vapour can spread over some distance. Wear protective gloves and avoid having petrol come into prolonged contact with your skin.

Mix the seed in vermiculite for easy sowing then sow quite thickly and cover with sharp sand. Place the seed trays outside for the autumn and winter but keep a close eye on them, as germination can start as early as November/December, although it does not usually occur until February. As soon as you see signs of germination, put the trays into a frost-free glasshouse and prick out as soon as germination has occurred. Germination will be rather uneven but pricking out must be done before the second pair of leaves appears because the seedlings do not react well to disturbance, even at this stage. You will get several flushes of germination over 3 to 4 months.

Placing the seed trays on a heated floor once the first flush of germination has started will bring forward the remaining seeds, although make sure you have the staff and ample space to cope with this — sometimes this can be a problem during February. We have found that although *R. coulteri* does need winter stratification, a wet winter will cause problems with root rot when germination begins. Placing a Dutch light over the trays is beneficial.

CULTIVATION

Romneya coulteri may be relatively easy to propagate but its cultivation is another matter.

Compost. The essential point is that the compost should be well drained and while pH is not of great importance, extremes should be avoided. *Romneya coulteri* is a hungry feeder but high levels of fertiliser should be avoided in the early stages to avoid a build up of salts that could lead to root scorch.

Feeding. *Romneya coulteri* does soon run out of steam, however, when this happens, top dressing is preferable to liquid feeding to avoid foliar scorch.

Pots. Deep “rose pots” are ideal for *R. coulteri* because it is quite deep rooting.

Beds. At Fromefield we have found capillary beds to be the best solution, although gravel standing areas work well too. Use of dark-coloured standing-out textiles such as Mypex is not recommended because they absorb too much heat at the root zone.

Pruning. At Fromefield we pinch the plants when young to promote a bushier growth habit.

Watering. *Romneya coulteri* requires plenty of water through the growing season, which is best applied in the morning or evening.

PEST AND DISEASE

Romneya coulteri is fairly pest resistant. Keep an eye out for slugs and caterpillars, along with red spider mite (two-spotted mite) and whitefly. A regular drench with Nemolt will control sciarid fly larvae. Drench regularly with Rovral or Repulse against *Botrytis* along with Octave to minimise the risk of stem rots.

ENVIRONMENT

As with any plant one is considering growing for the first time, clues about how to grow *R. coulteri* successfully come from studying and copying its natural environment.

Growing in the mountain ranges of southern California, *R. coulteri* encounters hot dry conditions with low daytime humidity and plenty of air movement. These areas are however subject to nighttime fog so a degree or two of humidity is not a real problem. Don't be fooled into thinking they need to be kept on the dry side. They will quickly perish if not kept moist.

Once planted out, *R. coulteri*'s deep searching roots will soon find their way to moisture and, if happy, after a few seasons will turn into more of an attractive weed than a notoriously difficult plant to propagate and cultivate — and you'll wonder what all the fuss was about.