

Success with Tom Mitchell's seed

Barry McWilliam

It was good to read Tom Mitchell's account of his adventures when collecting seed in Japan in autumn 2012 [*The Hardy Plant* Vol. 34 No. 2], which led me to check my successes (and failures) with germination of some of the seed he'd given to the HPS Seed Exchange. With a particular interest in wild-collected seed, I'd selected from last year's HPS list 13 of Tom's collections, mainly small trees and shrubs ranging from acers to viburnums.

Following my usual practice, as soon as the seed arrived on 19th January it was checked, counted and sown in 7cm pots, in my standard mix of equal parts of JI Seed Sowing, grit and multipurpose compost. The pots were placed outdoors on the north side of the greenhouse, with chicken wire protection against birds, for the weather to work its magic (fig. 1). Here in Northumberland we had 25cm of snow on the morning the seed arrived and a further 4 mornings with new snow before the end of January. February was colder than January but with only two mornings with lying snow. March proved to be the coldest month of the winter with no less than 14 air frosts, right to the last night of the month, and 4 days with lying snow. Despite or because of the low temperatures, before the end of March, 17 sets of my Seed Exchange seed had germinated, but none of them Japanese.

The first of the Japanese seed to germinate, on 22nd April, was the *Gentiana* sp. (577) (fig. 2). There was a good deal of chaff with the tiny seeds, which were sown in two pots. The seedlings were tiny and made no progress. At least three attempts were made to pot on, either



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Fig. 1 Barry's seeds get cold treatment

Fig. 2 *Gentiana* sp.

individually or in clumps, but this species is so resentful of disturbance that I fear that none will have survived.

A single seed of *Clerodendrum trichotomum* (909) (fig. 3) germinated on the 10th May and sits in splendid isolation in its own pot. In contrast, the *Callicarpa* sp. (783) and *Hydrangea* sp. (598) (fig. 4) both had multiple germinations in early June and on 24th June five of each were potted on. The final germination from this collection for 2013 was *Stachyurus praecox* (960) on 4th July, and 8 were potted on in late July. The rest will be left, to see what 2014 brings.

All of these very small seedling shrubs are now being given what shelter the alpine house can provide, because experience tells me that even very hardy shrubs, first year from seed, have made insufficient ripe wood to survive hard frost. 🌱

Fig. 3 *Clerodendrum trichotomum*

Tom Mitchell responds: I'm most grateful to Barry McWilliam for reporting germination successes and failures from my Japanese collections. It is fascinating to compare germination success rates under different protocols and climates. My general seed-sowing technique is similar to Barry's but I keep the seed pots in cold frames, where I can control the quantity of water they receive. Of the species that he mentions, the *Gentiana* also germinated well here. I have grown the seedlings on in their seed pot and will prick them out in clumps later this spring, if they have survived the winter. In contrast with Barry's experience, the *Clerodendrum* germinated like cress here, whereas I got only a few seedlings of the “*Callicarpa*”. It turns out that this isn't a *Callicarpa* species at all, but rather a small-fruited *Viburnum*, yet to be identified to species. Most of the *Hydrangea* species germinated prolifically. Following a tip from a friend in the USA, I moved most of them on to gentle bottom heat in spring,



where they germinated quickly. *Stachyurus praecox* germinated very well here too. Many of the collections will be two-year germinators. *Cardiocrinum*, for example, is germinating now and most of the the *Viburnum* collections should start to appear this spring. Don't give up yet!

Fig. 4 *Hydrangea* sp.

Barry McWilliam has gardened in mid-Northumberland for forty years and is still making a five-acre garden on heavy clay. He has grown the great majority of his plants from seed, all without the use of heat.

See www.evolution-plants.com and watch Tom Mitchell's short video for more information about Tom's plant hunting and newly established strictly mail-order nursery, The nursery will be open to the public for the first time for a special open day on Saturday 10 May, 2014.