***Schisandra chinensis* (Turcz.) Baill.**

Schisandraceae
Source of: wǔ wèi zǐ 五味子
magnolia vine fruit

Summary Description

A shade-tolerant woody vine, this dioecious plant bears fruit on old wood. "Five flavor fruit," ripe and right off the vine in September, is a unique gustatory experience. However, erroneous promotional information categorizes wǔ wèi zǐ as a Superior Class (i.e. food-grade) herb, which has led to abuse in the supplements industry. Although the rootstock is hardy to Zone 4, the vines set buds in autumn which are susceptible to winter wind chill and late spring frosts. Responding to moisture in spring, the vines become covered with smooth, papery leaves to 3 inches long, clearly veined and with finely toothed margins. Flowering occurs in May, 3 to 4 years after planting. The half-inch, fragrant white flowers resemble magnolia flowers in texture, with a pink blush around the tiny, pale green carpels. These grow over the summer to form a cluster of 14 to 40 fruits hanging from a peduncle, like small Concord grapes, ripening from light green to bright red in September. The fruits, ¼-inch in diameter, are smooth-skinned and contain one (sometimes two) small, kidney-shaped yellow-brown seeds.

Propagation

Can be propagated from root cuttings in spring. For seed germination, presoak fruit to remove pulp. If seed is planted immediately from fresh, ripe fruit in September, some of the seed will germinate immediately. For better rates of germination, warm stratify 2-3 months followed by cold stratification 3 months. Or, scarify seed with hot water, plant in a 72-cell tray, 3/8-inch deep, press down. Keep trays at 70°F at first, then alternate monthly between 70°F and 40°F until germination occurs. Thin to one plant per cell. Young leaves will burn and wither in unshaded greenhouse conditions. Transplant to quart pots after 6 months. Do not plant out until a substantial root mass has formed.

Cultivation

Schisandra is an understory vine that can be grown on deciduous trees. Left to nature, the vines become long and rangy and can grow too high for convenient harvest. Trained to a support, the roots sucker and the vines branch to form a shrubby mass. The ideal support is a sturdy vineyard trellis system with espaliered vines that could be smudged or covered to prevent late frosts from killing the buds. A forest edge or morning shade will provide the cool, moist conditions the plant prefers.

Harvest & Processing

For the EAM market, whole fruits including seeds must be dried like raisins. Fruit clusters will mold when over-ripe, or within a few days of harvest if left intact. More research is needed to devise a cost-effective means of drying the whole fruit, perhaps similar to that for raisins.

References

Flora of China: http://www.efloras.org/florataxon.aspx?flora_id=2&taxon_id=200008486
Bensky *Materia Medica* page: 858

Photo: Regina Serkin. *Note:* To dry separate fruits in an Excalibur yields a good product but is too labor-intensive.