

ROMNEYA COULTERI

Sheila Phillips

I love *Romneya coulteri*, the Matilija poppy or Californian tree poppy. And, yes, I know it's a suckering thug, and I have seen it doing its thuggery in many a spot, but I still think it has one of the most beautiful flowers there is. Its enormous, white, papery petals gleam and are set off by the innumerable yellow stamens and divided glaucous foliage. One description refers to the flowers as 'large and frail, built of the thinnest crumpled white silk, almost diaphanous'. I heartily concur. The whole plant can grow up to eight feet in one season. I tried for several years to find it in every garden centre I visited, and rang round all the local nurseries to see if they had it, to no avail. However, when I knew that we were to be visiting Elizabeth MacGregor's nursery, Ellenbank, in Kirkcudbright in July 2015, I emailed ahead asking for it, and collected it from there.

Romneya originates in southern California, from Ventura County and the Santa Ana mountains, south to Baja California. It grows in dry canyons and riverbeds, below 1200 metres, in chaparral and coastal sage scrub plant communities, sometimes in areas recently burned. It can also be found in Mexico. The name Matilija is from the canyon of the same name. This plant bears the largest flowers of any species native to California, rivalled only



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Romneya coulteri in full bloom, in August

by *Hibiscus lasiocarpus*. It was nominated for the honour of California state flower in 1890, but the smaller Californian poppy won the title in a landslide victory. The name *Romneya* is after the Reverend John Thomas Romney Robinson, a 19th century Irish astronomer, although the reason for this is obscure. The species name *coulteri* commemorates Thomas Coulter, an Irish botanist and explorer.

I have heard that *R. coulteri* is not considered very hardy, but I have also read that it can withstand temperatures down to minus 15°C, and perhaps even lower if the roots are covered. Years ago, I saw a huge clump of it in Pitmuies garden, some 20 miles north of Dundee. Admittedly, it was protected there by a south-facing wall, but my back garden is very sheltered so I'm hoping that it will survive. It was very late to show itself this year (2016) and is still less than three feet tall, but I was delighted to find a very small flower bud on it - probably too late in the year to come to anything but there's always next year!

R. coulteri is said to like a sheltered spot and free-draining soil, and can be propagated by root cuttings taken in November, or by digging out the suckers. The seedpod is a bristly capsule, 1-2 inches long, containing many tiny seeds. The RHS says that seed should be sown in spring at 13-16°C, although I have also read that this method is not recommended



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The complex seedpod of *R. coulteri*

due to subsequent root disturbance during transplantation, which many poppies dislike.

Some sources categorise *R. coulteri* as a semi-evergreen sub-shrub, but Christopher Lloyd claimed that if it is cut down to ground level in the winter it will behave as a herbaceous perennial. Problems might include caterpillars or powdery mildew, although I don't believe these are common.

Plants can vary due to hybridisation, particularly with the sub-species *R. trichocalyx*, which has a hairy calyx. Graham Stuart Thomas believed the best cultivar to be *R. 'White Cloud'*, which has fragrant flowers and is very vigorous. Another good cultivar is *R. 'Butterfly'*, with large flowers with overlapping petals and undulate margins. The plant can develop a network of underground

rhizomes spreading for several feet but, ever hopeful, I have planted mine in a circular bed of its own, surrounded by lawn which is mowed regularly. Another name for it is 'Dream of the Desert'. Only time will tell whether this dream turns out to be a nightmare!

2017 Update

I am delighted to say that my *R. coulteri* survived the (mild) winter. I decided not to shorten it at all but to leave it to its own devices. It was late starting into growth in the spring, but then stretched to over five feet tall and I had to stand on a stool to take photographs of the flowers. In late July it had 3 open flowers and 29 buds, and it went on flowering throughout August. Not all the buds opened but quite a number did and I revelled in their beauty. Long may my plant live - and desist from suckering!

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Author's Update, 2018:

Despite six months of unremitting freezing weather here last winter, and a plant which looked totally dead, my romneya has done its stuff once again!