

# IPOMOEA HORSEFALLIAE

By Stephanie Jackson

Gardeners in sub-tropical climates can only drool at the thought of a clematis that's scrambling over a trellis and draped in glorious flowers, for it's in cooler climates that these plants are most at home. Fortunately, there are several climbing plants that are more appropriate for warm climates, and there's one that's certainly worth considering. It's the cardinal creeper, *Ipomoeae horsfalliae*, a vigorous evergreen climb-

er that's a member of the morning glory / *Convulvaceae* family.

Its genus name '*Ipomoea*' is a Greek word meaning 'like a worm', a reference perhaps to its twining tendrils, and its species name honours Charles Horsfall, a 19th century botanist who was the Lord Mayor of the English city of Liverpool. With *I. horsfalliae* being a native of Brazil, it's unlikely that it ever graced the mayor's garden, but it

made itself at home and has become naturalised on several Caribbean islands, including Jamaica, and also in Hawaii where it was introduced at the beginning of the 20th century.

With its glossy dark green leaves it's attractive at any time of the year, but it puts on its best display in spring and summer when, with clusters of buds that appear like dark red berries, it hints that it's about to burst into bloom. And when its dark red tubular flowers, with their satin textured petals finally appear, only a true Philistine could fail to be impressed.

The cardinal creeper, which demands a warm climate and cannot tolerate frost, requires fertile well-drained soil in a location with plenty of sunlight or merely light shade. During its early period of growth it requires adequate water to ensure that the soil remains moist, but once established it is extremely drought tolerant, although for an optimum floral display it should be watered regularly during the flowering period.

Most parts of the plant, which produces white sap, are poisonous, and this is probably one of the factors that guarantee that it is rarely threatened by any insect pests other than mealy bugs.

Although it is initially a very slow growing plant, it grows vigorously once well established, but it requires minimal maintenance, other than to be cut back quite heavily after flowering.

It's a useful species to grow on a trellis or pergola to provide year round shade, shelter from wind, or privacy, or to cover an archway or an unsightly fence, but if the



fence on which it is grown is one that divides neighbouring properties, then you'll need to keep an eye on this rambling beauty, for although it doesn't generally become an invasive species, you'll need to ensure, as with all climbing plants, that it doesn't head for trouble on the other side of the border.

In its native habitat its flowers are fertilised almost exclusively by hummingbirds, and where they are absent it rarely produces seeds, and those that do develop are very slow to germinate. The best way to propagate cardinal creeper is by layering, but even with this method of propagation success is never guaranteed, for layers and cuttings are both very reluctant to take root. There's a contradictory side to this plant's character however. Layers and cutting may stubbornly refuse to take root, but if, in the future, you try to eradicate *Ipomoea horsfalliae* from your garden, any remaining sections of roots may produce suckers that make it almost impossible to rid yourself of this plant that may have initially seemed so reluctant to grow.

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