

Akebia quinata

[Synonyms : *Akebia micrantha*, *Akebia sempervirens*, *Rajania quinata*]

CHOCOLATE VINE is a deciduous to semi-evergreen twining vine. Native to eastern Asia (particularly central China, and Korea and Japan), it has strongly fragrant (vanilla-scented), purplish-brown flowers and leaflets that become purple-tinged in Winter.

It is also known as *Akebi* (Japanese), *Akebia* (Dutch, English, Finnish, German), *Akebie à cinq feuilles* (French), *Akebie pětičetná* (Czech), *Çikolata sarmaşıği* (Turkish), *Fembladig akebia* (Swedish), *Fingerblättrige Akebie* (German), Fiveleaf akebia, Fiveleaflet akebia, *Funfblättrige Akebie* (German), *Kastanjaköynnös* (Finnish), *Mokutsu* (German, Japanese), *Mu tong* (Chinese), Purple fiveleaf akebia, Raisin vine, and *Urum* (Korean).

The fruit split open along a single seam when ripe.

Quinata is derived from Latin *quinque* (five) meaning ‘in fives, divided into five parts or with parts in fives’ with reference to the leaflets.

Chocolate vine is cultivated in Asia and elsewhere as an ornamental plant. It is often used to cover walls or provide shade.

The sausage-shaped, bloomed purple fruit with their insipid-taste are eaten in Japan. The flesh is consumed raw and the bitter-tasting skin is eaten fried. They can also be made into ice cream or a drink. Young shoots are added to salads and pickles – and the leaflets have been used as a tea substitute.

Apparently the peeled stems have provided basketry material.

The vine was introduced to Britain by the famous plant collector, Robert Fortune (1813-1880) in 1847. It was also introduced to North America but the timing of this is debated. Some say chocolate vine arrived there in 1845 while other authorities opt for a little later, 1884 – and add that in this latter case Robert Fortune was again the instigator of the vine’s appearance on that Continent as well although this would have been after his death.

The vine can be cause for environmental concern. Authorities note that under conducive conditions chocolate vine is rampant (a plant can increase by 20-40 feet in one year) and can smother and kill vegetation (it can even overrun the canopy of trees) – and it can be so dense that it excludes light and prevents seed germination and seedling growth.

Medicinally, some records suggest that local herbalists have used the vine to treat period problems, some forms of cancer, blood disorders, urinary problems, fluid retention and stomach upsets, as well as using it as a laxative and tonic. The root has been prescribed for worms. Chinese research has suggested that the plant has some contraceptive properties.