

Lapageria rosea

CHILEAN BELLFLOWER is a twining, climbing evergreen shrub. Native to southern Chile and adjacent Argentina it has small waxy, deep pink or white flowers.

It is also known as Chilean bellflower vine, Chile bells, Copihue, *Lapagerie* (German), and Lily of the Incas; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of ‘there is no unalloyed good’.

The flowers are pollinated by humming birds.

Rosea means ‘rose-like, rosy or rose-coloured’ with reference to the flowers.

The yellow berries are eaten in Chile as a fruit, raw or cooked.

The shrub was introduced to Spain in the mid-18th Century – and to Britain by William Lobb (1809-1864) [a Cornish plant hunter who with his brother Thomas collected plants for the English nursery, Veitch and Sons] in 1847. The Spanish introduction must have been before 1763 as authorities note that Chilean bellflower was growing in the Swedish consul’s house in Cadiz in that year and seeds from it were sent then to the famous Swedish naturalist and physician, Carolus Linnaeus (1707-1778).

Chilean bellflower is cultivated as an ornamental plant in Europe today.

Records declare that this was one of the plants tangled up with an unnecessarily unattractive story of which there appear to be several versions. In the 1770s under the sponsorship of the French Government Joseph Dombey (1742-1794), a botanist (as well as both a doctor of medicine and an archaeologist) sought the approval of the Spanish Government to examine South American flora. Apparently Spain grudgingly agreed to this on condition that he was accompanied by two young and inexperienced Spanish pharmacists, Hipólito Ruíz-López (1754-1815) and José Antonio Pavón (1754-1844), and two equally young Spanish draughtsmen. From 1775 or 1777 this ill-matched group travelled in South America and studied the plants of Chile and Peru. Despite many problems that beset them while out there on this daunting task plant specimens were collected by both Dombey and the Spaniards – and Dombey made his own extensive notes (and eventually returned to France with dried specimens). To add to their difficulties it seems that the passage of the finances put up for the project was hesitant and to cap it all when they were returning to Europe the Spaniards were shipwrecked and lost their collections of live specimens at sea (some say these died in Spanish customs houses). This is when things really started to turn sour for Dombey. He is said, according to some, to have signed an agreement that he would not publish any material until his Spanish colleagues had returned to their homeland but ill and broke on French soil he allowed the French botanist and judge, L’Heritier (1746-1800), to prepare his material for publication at his own expense. Not only did the Spanish Government then proceed to confiscate Dombey’s specimens as replacements for those lost by the Spanish members of the expedition but commandeered his notes as well. The materialization of finances for the project continued to be erratic and it was ten years (1788) before the first volume of *Flora Peruviana et Chilensis* (a projected nine volumes that ultimately became three or four) was published by Ruiz-Lopez and Pavon. For Dombey and the French Government the final injustice then emerged. Although it is noted that a large part of Dombey’s own work was included in this material no acknowledgement of its provenance was accorded.

