

THE PLANT COLUMN

Martin Stimson



Blue Fingers Squeeze Colour into Autumn, and Grip the Imagination of Children

*Martin Stimson continues a very personal series of reflections, selecting plants that have meaning for him. In this issue he discusses *Decaisnea Fargesii* which was given to him as a seedling by a close horticultural friend.*

“That’s disgusting!” comes the cry of a small child as they pick up the pods and squeeze its sides. “Yuk it’s slimy!” another one shouts. The pods in question resemble a handful of human fingers, now lying scattered on the floor. When touched they feel fleshy and life-like. However they are also surprising for being bright blue.

One of the more unorthodox names for the plant from which the pods have fallen is ‘Dead Mans Fingers’, although others prefer to call them ‘Blue Sausages’. The latter being a slight exaggeration in my view as they are more like chipolatas than a firm breakfast Cumberland.



Children can be fascinated by the macabre and the grotesque. In the sphere of horticulture, the pale silvery blue fingery pods of *Decaisnea fargesii* can be used to grip the imagination of children and provide them a wonderful entry point in to the wonders of natural world. Common names for plants, although unreliable in communication, are much more memorable and easier for people to relate too and remember than botanical binomials. *Decaisnea* name is taken from Botanist Joseph Decaisne (1807 – 1882). Known in the

literature as a “french botanist” he was born in Brussels, Belgium, but it seems he spent most of his time in Paris.

October in the garden provides all the horticultural evidence that's needed that autumn is on the way. Cyclamen give the game away that summer is leaving and soon afterwards Decasinea pods in my part of England begin to colour and then the first Colchicum autumnale flower. This year my green Decasinea pods are turning blue at the same time as Sternbergia lutea glints yellow flashes at me between shiny green leaves. With the seasonal horticultural clock comes changing weather patterns. As the weakening sun of late summer is replaced by the strengthening gusts of the autumn wind, a sideways blow across the garden, buffets the stems and annually loosens the bean like pods of the Decaisnea. They then turn up distributed around



the base of the plant and strewn across the patio. The stems, sometimes like a thicket and sometimes top heavy and scruffy, can be few in number, but long and lanky. Thus they sway from the base of the thicket especially under the weight of the tufts of giant pinnate leaves. The stems are not always pliable and snapped stems can occur which is always a heartache. Fortunately the plant can produce strong regrowth from the base or a cut, so branches can be replaced by the knowledgeable use of scateurs.

Blue ‘fruit’ in pod like structures is not common on such a scale in horticulture, especially in clusters within a large shrub.

The pods are sometimes likened to Broad Beans but in reality they are smaller and rounder and their texture tempts the handler to squeeze them. A firm grasp on a blue finger provides a tactile experience that is unique in the garden and highly memorable. One of those moments you talk about afterwards to friends in a conversation which starts “You’ll never guess what I’ve just seen?”

“Blue Pods? They reply “You’re joking? –What? Like dead men fingers?”

It’s the adults who then tell you it sounds disgusting.



Pods that fall off

In the wild these pods decay quickly - in England getting eaten by slugs and snails - as well as rotting down on the wet soil. This leaves copious numbers of seeds on the soil surface which get chilled over winter. Germination takes place freely in spring thus perpetuating the thicket and providing a diversity of plant age ranges. If you take a pod and dissect it the numerous black seeds inside are surrounded by a thick glutinous jelly. It’s this which gives the pod its life-like (or lifeless?) feel. I’m told the jelly can be eaten but tasting things for the fun of it has never been in my repertoire in case it poisons me or I need to spit it out. There are a number of web references which suggest it’s possible and I might just be tempted this year to try. By drying the seeds they can easily be preserved but I always like to let them grow where they land and then transplant the seedlings after they’ve emerged in spring.

In a particularly mad moment which created worried looks in friends and neighbours I’ve once maintained a small pile of pods on a table just to watch them decay and reveal their contents, much to the disgust of wife and family. I did this in the interests of Horticultural research and didn’t discover much at all other than the pods go black and vanish to leave the seeds behind.

Pods that remain

Pods that remain in the tree become more visible as the leaves fall off and therefore have some distinct ornamental and visual interest value. Even so, many visitors to my plant collection don't spot the pods or the plant until it's pointed out to them. Then their mouths drop open, surprised that such a thing exists, "How strange" they say.



We are of course much more used and conditioned to seeing the vibrant reds and oranges in autumn in form of berries. The bright orange of the Sorbus for example shouts at us and the birds, sending out the message that they are ripe and ready to be eaten. Even the white berries of the Symphoricarpos are more common place in both gardens and urban landscapes. This is where the Decaisnea is much more subtle, maybe a connoisseur's plant? But then that sounds elitist and I'm not a fan of that. Decaisnea is in my view a valuable plant which has a number of features which to the enthusiast make it

an attraction for most of the year. This includes upright stiff branches, conspicuously large scaly buds in winter, super sized or 'handsome' leaves, dangling flowers and then that weird fruit.

When you watch an antiques expert studying ancient plates, furniture and silverware they seem to spot marks, scratches and features which the average person would miss. So it seems the same happens with plants. Gardeners on the whole are observant folk, but unless they are studious horticulturalists (as opposed to studious botanists) it would be easy not to spot the bits of a Decasinea which enthuse and excite. Where the keen and enthusiastic gardener will follow the obvious and maybe showy ornamental features of a plant, the expert, like the antiques expert, will get to see the nuances and the subtlety which typical gardeners might easily overlooked.

I've met many experienced gardeners and horticulturalists who have never had the good fortune to encounter the "Blue Sausage plant", and maybe it's because it's not blowsy or conspicuous. It's a back office plant that deserves more front of house exposure.

Leaves and Shadows

Being tall and rather an ordinary green, potentially makes *Decaisnea* invisible. Unless it's pointed out to you. It stands tall above the fences, with its architectural foliage providing dappled shade and wonderful shadows on the patio in the summer. Worth growing for the leaves alone. Best grown perhaps in isolation, this puts the plant on a visual platform where it can be underplanted with lower growing specimens, or season colour plants. A emergent focal point in a horizontal ground cover and with no particular hang-ups about soil either.



From seed the *Decasinea* reveals itself as a tall sometimes leggy plant, with upright stems 4 meters or more in about 2 but more likely three years. Giant leaves over half a metre long that are pinnate, but easily damaged, stick out at right angles and can make a decent canopy. For years now I've watched my plant in Summer loose half of each of the leaflets, as if someone has gone around the edges with scissors and cut each leaflet in half. Periodically I look for caterpillars, but to no avail. But one day I will discover

the cause and wonder why it took so long to find out.

Slender green flowers

Even in flower it's possible to miss this plant. The pastel green shades with a tint of yellow and thin petals combine to provide delicate blooms skulking in between the leaves, or hanging from a tuft at the top. The flowers are sometimes described as “not ornamental” but in reality they are fascinating rather than showy. They are quirky and almost frail, with pointed buds which dangle on thin green stems. Does being lime green and so frail suggests they



are wind pollinated?

Straight strong stems, large buds, big leaves and curious flowers are merely the foundations curiously which build to a climax in October and those strange but true pods. During a warm spring when temperatures encourage pollination a good set of small pods will be evident to the keen plants person and observer of horticultural development. At this early stage the pods are tiny - not as big as a clove - and they resemble green small caterpillars lined up in row. You have to love your plant, and visit it regularly to spot this.

Like apples these pods can sometimes fall off before they develop to leave a sparse autumn display. But in a good year a profusion of pods will remain in place and swell to the size of the fingers on a man's hand. Metallic cobalt blue pods hanging in clusters (not unlike small bananas) become slowly more eye-catching as they deepen in colour. Like a lot of fruit as they ripen they become softer and therefore more off putting to handle.

The texture of each pod also fascinates me. A lot of fruit has a smooth shiny coat, but the pods of *Decaisnea* have tiny dots on them which seem to be translucent and the light reflects from them so that under different lighting conditions they appear shiny blue or green. Why doesn't anyone notice this? Apart of course from Bean (*Beans Manual of Trees and Shrubs Hardy in the British Isles*) who notes the warty appearance of the pods?

As October arrives the remaining pods begin to colour and deepen to a dark blue and become more consistent and even in colour. The fun then begins because as they fall its tempting to pick them up and as the children discover they are soft and fleshy. Each pod resembles and feels like a finger and can be squeezed gently but not too hard, otherwise the slime escapes. It's the feel of these pods which gets this plant the rather morbid name of "dead mans figures". Inside the small flat shinny seeds are surrounded by moist slime which looks like glue, but in reality probably keeps the seeds from drying out and provides enough for them to survive on the ground.

In my experience these seeds germinate easily almost like mustard and cress and over the years I have given away any plants in the hope of inspiring and enthusing other people about the wonders of this plant. There's something rather special about

having a plant in your garden that is unusual, rarely seen in garden centre and unknown to friends, relatives and visitors. Not in an exclusive way but in an inspiring way as it provides that wonderful opportunity to share, inform, enthuse and educate.

That's how I got my plant, that's what encouraged me to share information knowledge and experience. I too was given a seedling by a friend many years ago so the plant comes with baggage of fond memories as well as pods which I can squeeze.

When I shake hands with the dead mans finger each autumn I'm renewing a relationship and I remember. This is how horticulture touches the mind and the soul

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