

Dragon Trees of the Pacific Mist®

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INTRODUCTION

I have long been enamoured with a favourite food of the endangered kakapo parrot. *Dracophyllum*, with their often bizarre habit of growth that hints of ancient lineage, these ericas of the south, can be large trees to tiny alpine mats. There are in fact three closely related genera within Australia and Tasmania, Lord Howe Island, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Chatham Island, Stewart Island, Auckland Island, and Campbell Island.

The genus includes about 60 species in three subgenera:

- *Oreothamnus*: 28 species in New Zealand and 1 in Tasmania
- *Dracophyllum*: 7 species in New Zealand, 8 in New Caledonia, 4 in Australia, 1 in Tasmania
- *Cardophyllum*: 1 in New Caledonia

There are possibly more to be found.

Dragon trees also include the related genera *Richea* with 9 species in Tasmania and 2 in Australia, and *Sphenotoma* with 7 species in Western Australia.

So we can see that there are a number to try to grow, also with the possibility of producing hybrids which could be more amenable to cultivation. Why then aren't we all growing them? With their amazing aesthetic build to wiry mats with shiny foliage of green, bronze, and blue; and sprays of flowers in white or pink. The major disadvantage is their slow rate of growth; in this case nature is not in a hurry.

In cultivation a semi-shady site that keeps moist but not wet, plenty of humus mulch, old sawdust, or crushed bark are best. This will help provide habitat for mycorrhiza, more than likely a requisite for quality growth.

PROPAGATION

Seed. This is the usual method. The seed, collected just before the capsule opens, is dust fine and viability is short. I sow it very thinly on trays of fine crushed bark, but peat or leaf mold could be used. Germination takes about 3 weeks, the minute seedlings must be kept cool and moist. Frost cloth is good. At about 2 years old the seedlings can be transplanted into ericaceous potting mix. I use chopped *Podocarpus* roots with their mass of mycorrhiza, in my potting mix.

Cuttings. My best results have been with early summer cuttings, but cuttings taken at other times have rooted okay. Small basal shoots are best dipped into honey water (1 teaspoon honey in a half glass of warm water) for 3 min. I use #2 hormone powder Seradix and stick into fine pumice sand, water, and place a clear plastic bag

placed over the pots which is then placed in a cool shady area. The cuttings take about 12 weeks to produce roots. The fine-leaf species are the easiest to strike, but I have grown *D. latifolium*, *D. fiordense*, *D. longifolium*, *D. sinclairii*, *D. arboreum*, and *Richea pandanifolia*.

While these are all growing well and a few other nurseries are producing them there is still much to be learnt — growing the smaller alpines some of which prefer a drier site with crushed stone, or the swamp dwelling ones living in deep restiad peats. It is up to us to take on the challenge and produce something other than a 10-week pansy!