

## Fritillaries

Fritillaries add charm and elegance to a garden, but you need to choose and grow them carefully as many some species have a strong death-wish.

There are around 200 species of *Fritillaria*, hailing from every corner of the globe. Apart from the large and rather vulgar *Fritillaria imperialis*, crown imperial, most are low-growing with a stem bearing one or more drooping bell-like flowers. These subtle flowers range from white to almost black, and include wonderfully delicate-looking lemons, crimsons and chocolate brown.

I can't think of a spring bulb I'd sooner have. Daffodils, snowdrops and crocuses bring a welcome splash of colour after the drab winter months, but fritillaries are like a good wine that should be sipped, savoured and treated with the utmost respect. Make the most of their fine display by growing in pots and placing them on a wall or window sill close to the door. Short of scrabbling around on your hunkers by the flower border, you'll never enjoy the full impact and delicacy of the petals on these charming flowers without growing in pots or a raised bed.

There's no doubt that fritillaries can be difficult to grow. A hundred years ago, the rock garden writer, Reginald Farrer<sup>1</sup>, said: "Many of the race are very miffy or very mimpish, or both, and the family all round has a bad character." Although Cyril Lafong, Scotland's leading fritillary expert, is much more enthusiastic and has built up an impressive collection, he does admit: "Some varieties can pose a real challenge. Sometimes you think you have mastered their cultivation only to find that in a bad year, you can lose most or the whole of a variety. A plant that has been thriving for many years can suddenly start to go back for no obvious reason."

The secret of success for someone new to this wonderful plant is to know what it needs. Many species originated in hot, dry mountain climes and need damp springs followed by hot, dry summers and dry winters. *F. acmopetala*, with dark markings on its green outer petals and more pronounced smudges on the inner ones, is not too exacting. But it does need moist, free-draining soil to thrive. The dwarf *F. davidii* is an absolute delight but is very demanding and only an expert will succeed with this one.

The easiest group of fritillaries includes our native *F. meleagris*, snake's head fritillary. The great Glasgow architect and designer, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, magically depicted the hallmark of this species, the chequered squares of darker and lighter colours on squarish petals. His 1915 watercolour, 'Fritillaria' is displayed in the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow, and precisely captures the unique beauty of the plant.

Although *F. meleagris* requires moist but free-draining soil, it is perfectly happy during the cool, damp weather that sadly ruins most Scottish summers. It will even cope with partial shade. The chequered petals come in white, pink and the more usual purple. Whites and purples look good growing together. *F. meleagris* is versatile, growing successfully in meadows and small pots. I also have some at the edge of a waist high bed round the side of the house. On a much grander scale, I don't believe anything can beat an ancient meadow in Magdalen College, Oxford, with its carpet of gently drooping purple bells.

If you do have a grassed area suitable for fritillaries, start the bulbs in pots in late summer or early autumn. Mix two parts of a loam based compost with one part grit for good drainage. Plant the bulbs on their side to prevent water getting in to rot the bulb. Once established, plant out. Use a plant dibber to make a hole 15cm deep. Do not cut the grass till the bulb's leaves have completely died back, no earlier than the autumn.

If you'd like to widen your selection of fritillaries, check carefully that your preferred species copes with cool, damp summers. I'm not suggesting that mail order firms are as unreliable as Farrer implies when he says: "catalogues do not always emphasize the miffy temper of the prizes they proclaim." He continues: "an enormous number of the Fritillaries often appear transfigured by the enthusiasm of those who desire to get rid of them." Just check your plant can handle Scottish growing conditions.

Two good choices for this are: *Fritillaria camschatcensis* and *F. pallidiflora*. The first one, Black sarana, even grows happily in the slightly acidic soil suitable for rhododendrons. Black or almost black is one of my favourite colours for flowers, and this one has up to 8 black bells dangling from the stem. I'm also pretty keen on the lemon shades of *pallidiflora* and was relieved to read that Farrer reckoned it had "more stalwart stature" and was "a bulb of good sound perennial temper." The stem's four pale lemon flowers are offset by wide glaucous grey-green leaves. This native of north east Turkey is tough and will tolerate slight shade.

<sup>1</sup>Reginald Farrer: 'The English Rock Garden'.