







# Bring out the bells

The exotic snake's-head fritillary is the only British native of 130 bulbs in this fascinating family, many of which deserve a place in the garden. John Hoyland recommends the best

**W**HEN *Fritillaria imperialis* first arrived in Vienna, in 1576, it caused a sensation. As part of the first wave into Europe of unfamiliar plants from Constantinople, it soon spread throughout the gardens of the Continent. At 3ft tall, with brightly coloured flowers that have an unruly topknot of leaves, it is easy to imagine how thrilling its appearance must have been. It featured in many paintings of the period and a still life of 1626 by Johannes Bosschaert famously shows an enormous *Fritillaria imperialis* dominating the canvas, overshadowing all the fancy tulips, anemones and other exotic plants that were exciting collectors of the time. Clearly, he considered the crown imperial, as it became known, to be supreme. It remains, today, a dramatic presence, still capable of producing gasps of wonder.

‘Teardrops of nectar form at the base of each flower’

*Fritillaria imperialis* has become a mainstay of spring borders, where it stands proudly, and flamboyantly, above tulips, hyacinths and narcissus. Throughout April the bell-like flowers dangle from solid stems, attracting pollinating insects to the teardrops of nectar that form at the base of each flower. From its first unfurling, the plant makes its presence known by its pungent, foxy smell: to some, →

**Less fussy than the species, *Fritillaria imperialis* ‘William Rex’ soon clumps up**





Above from left: *Fritillaria pallidiflora* needs humus-rich soil; British native *F. meleagris*; the white form, *F. meleagris* 'Alba'; *F. acmopetala*



Above from left: Vigorous *F. elwesii* is good in a pot and can be replanted in the garden; *F. persica*, John Gerard wrote in 1597, was popular in London gardens; *F. michailovskyi* likes full sun. Below from left: *F. uva-vulpis*, introduced from Iran, spreads well if grown in moist soil; *F. persica* 'Ivory Bells', a recent introduction; *F. pyrenaica* is tough enough to be grown in borders





‘From its first unfurling, it makes its presence known; it is one of the perfumes of spring’

this is a disagreeable, even nauseating, scent; to others, it is one of the perfumes of spring, a sign that the garden is reawakening.

Early fascination with fritillaries was not limited to *Fritillaria imperialis*. The attention of plant collectors was also captured by the spires of chocolate-coloured bells of *F. persica*, the stems of which are tightly packed with flowers that have a silvery sheen. John Gerard wrote in 1597 that the species was widespread in London gardens, the result, he wrote, ‘of the industrie of Travellers’. No mention of the hard work of those gardeners who struggled on clay soil to provide the well-drained conditions the bulb demands. Recently, a cultivar, *F. persica* ‘Ivory Bells’, has been introduced that has cream-coloured flowers. Grown together, the two forms make an arresting sight. →

## Recommended varieties

### *Fritillaria elwesii*

An elegant, airy plant with wiry 1ft-tall stems that support two or three long and narrow flowers. The petals are striped in a rich maroon and yellowish green. It grows well in containers, but it is a vigorous species so, after enjoying them in a pot, plant the bulbs in the garden

### *Fritillaria uva-vulpis*

Although not introduced into Britain until the 1960s, this Iranian species quickly became popular, due in part to the ease with which it establishes large colonies. Although the narrow, mahogany-coloured bells are edged in gold and usually appear singly, this is variable and occasionally two or three flowers appear from the same stem. It grows to about 18in tall

### *Fritillaria persica* ‘Adiyaman’

Named after the Turkish town where it was found growing, this cultivar is far superior to the species, with larger flowers and brighter foliage. The flowers are almost black and bloomed like a Merlot grape. The blue-grey foliage unfurls from the

soil as early as February and, by March, the plant is in full, glorious flower

### *Fritillaria imperialis* ‘William Rex’

The bells of the flower are stained bronze at the top, a colour that is repeated on the fat stems. The foliage is broad and glossy. It is less temperamental than the species and bulks up quickly to form impressive clumps

### *Fritillaria pallidiflora*

This is only properly happy in humus-rich, well-drained soil in dappled shade. If you can provide this, it will reward you with a drift of luminous, creamy-yellow bells throughout April. The glaucous foliage grows to 16in tall, with each stem topped by four or five flowers

### *Fritillaria pyrenaica*

In the wild, this grows in alpine meadows and is strong enough to hold its own in the rough and tumble of a British border or even in rough grass. The bells are faintly tessellated in the manner of the snake’s-head fritillary and edged with gold. It grows to about 1ft tall and sometimes has two, or even three, bells hanging from the top of the stem



*Fritillaria imperialis* makes a striking addition to this spring border in the gardens of Tudor treasure Coughton Court, near Alcester in Warwickshire, where it picks up the gleaming burgundy leaves of *Bergenia cordifolia* and *Heuchera* ‘Palace Purple’





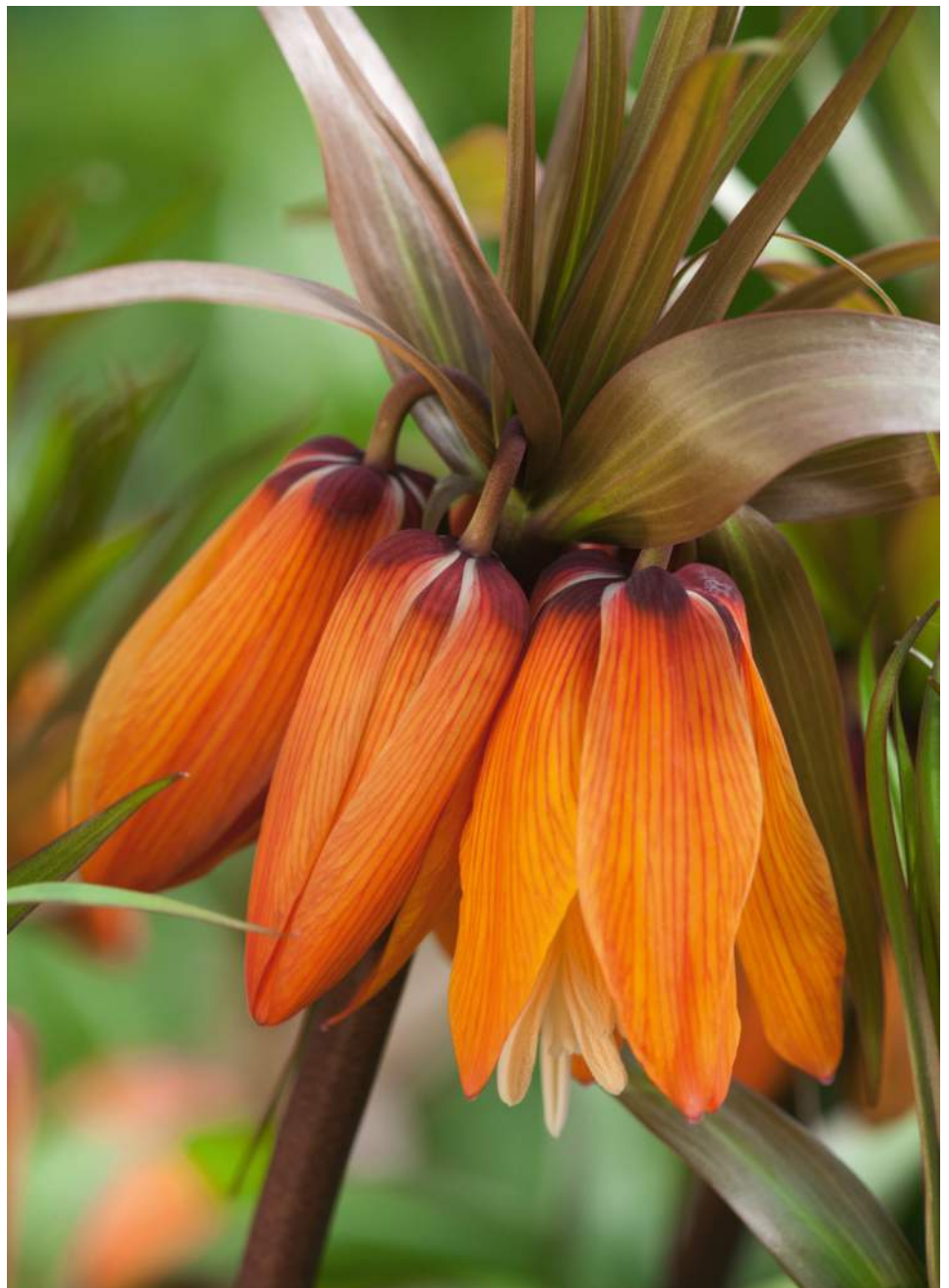


There are about 130 species of fritillaria bulbs, only one of which is native to Britain. The snake's-head fritillary, *Fritillaria meleagris*, can be seen most spectacularly in the water meadows close to Magdalen College, Oxford (*A snake's-head fritillary in the grass*, January 27, 2021). The damp soil of the meadows provides the perfect growing condition for the plant, but it is tolerant of a wide range of situations and has even naturalised in orchards on the dry chalk soil of the South Downs. The charm of its broad-shouldered bells and the exquisite, chequered patterning of its petals have kept the plant in cultivation for centuries. The flowers range from deep purple to dusky pink, with the occasional white seedling appearing.

## ‘Vita Sackville-West described them, unkindly, as “sulky-dark” flowers’

Although the genus has flowers in a wide range of form and habit, few are as exuberant as *Fritillaria imperialis*. Most, in sober tones of purples, mauves and greens, are unpretentious plants. Vita Sackville-West described them, unkindly, as ‘sulky-dark’ flowers ‘staining the ground’.

For many gardeners, however, this restrained palette of colours is a welcome antidote to the strident-yellow daffodils, dirty-pink hyacinths and bold-red tulips that dominate the season. A drift of the demure green and mahogany bells of *Fritillaria acmopetala*, for example, is as seductive and enchanting as anything else in the garden in spring. Equally easy to grow, and widely available, is *F. michailovskyi*, the pixie-hat flowers of which are a bright mahogany edged with a broad band of gold.



Facing page: Yellow *Fritillaria imperialis* ‘Lutea’ offers height and variety when combined with tulips. Above: ‘Sunset’ has good disease resistance and will reach 36–48in in height

### How to grow fritillaries


**The bulbs of both *Fritillaria imperialis* and *F. persica* are likely to rot on wet soils, so plant them on their side or lay them on a layer of grit to help keep moisture out of the crown. Plant them about three times the depth of the bulb. After several years, both will produce lots of foliage and no flowers, a sign that they are overcrowded. Carefully dig up the bulbs in late spring, divide and replant immediately, adding lots of fresh compost**

Species such as *Fritillaria meleagris*, *F. pyrenaica*, *F. uva-vulpis* and *F. acmopetala*

are tolerant of most soils, but they will spread most rapidly in moist ones. *F. assyriaca*, *F. elwesii*, *F. michailovskyi* and *F. pontica* need to be in well-drained soil in full sun

**For fritillaries grown in pots, use a mix of about two parts compost (John Innes No 2 is ideal) with one part grit. Repot the bulbs at the end of the summer using fresh compost**

The best fritillaries to naturalise in grass are *Fritillaria meleagris*, *F. uva-vulpis*, *F. pyrenaica* and *F. elwesii*. In all cases, leave mowing until early September to give the plants a chance to both seed themselves and to die down naturally

To appreciate the grace and elegance of fritillary flowers, grow a few in pots, where you can study the flowers closely. A collection of containers, standing on a table close to the house, is as rewarding as the most extravagantly planted border. Stick to the easy-to-grow plants mentioned here. Many of the species are demanding plants that require a deal of mollycoddling to thrive. The glasshouses at Kew and at the Cambridge Botanic Garden (which holds a National Collection of the genus) are filled in spring with pots of these fritillaries. Admire them there, grown by experts, and concentrate at home on those species more considerate towards us ordinary gardeners.   
*John Hoyland is garden adviser at Glyndebourne, East Sussex*