





Dreamy spires

Foxgloves, which can be planted now, provide the perfect link between the garden and the countryside, says John Hoyland

FOXGLOVES, with their towering spires of bee-friendly flowers, are one of our most imposing wild-flowers and one of the few to have jumped from the woodland edge and the verges of country lanes into our gardens. At the beginning of the 20th century, Gertrude Jekyll was enthusiastic about their use in herbaceous borders and recommended them to create a link between the order of the garden and the wildness of the countryside. Today, they are comfortably at home in cottage-style gardens, in perennial meadows and even in minimalist modern gardens.

‘They are endlessly adaptable, even flourishing in cracks in paving’

In the wild, the common foxglove has purple flowers with little variation, save the occasional plant with white flowers, but nurseries and plant breeders have introduced numerous cultivars that encompass a range of colours, often with speckled flowers. These cultivars are produced from seed and the colour of the flowers is not always as advertised, but ‘Sutton’s Apricot’ is reliable, with warm apricot buds that fade to pastel pink as the flower ages. The Excelsior group is another dependable strain that ranges through pale to dark pink with purple spots and with flowers that are much larger than those of the species.

Digitalis purpurea, the native foxglove, is a biennial that produces its columns of flowers in early summer, sets copious seed and then dies. The quantity and fertility →

Native purple *Digitalis purpurea*, with roses, *Crambe cordifolia*, delphiniums and astrantia



of the seed explains both its success in the wild and the way the plant crops up in unexpected places; part of the allure of foxgloves is their habit of appearing in parts of the garden where you would never dream of planting them. Although their preference is for rich soil in partial shade, foxgloves seem to be endlessly adaptable, even managing to flourish in cracks in paving. These are flowers that are best adapted to relaxed, informal gardens, so, if you want to grow them as part of a carefully designed border, they need to be sown (or bought) each year and planted in the spot where you want them to flower.

The rest of the foxglove family is perennial and thus much more predictable, reappearing each year in the same place. Seedlings may appear, but the parent plant remains. Leave the seedlings to grow on or, if they are in the wrong place, pot them up, because even perennial forms are short-lived. None of the perennial species is native to Britain, with most being from Europe or Asia, where they grow on poor soil in sunny situations, but they have all adapted well to the diversity of British gardens. In general, they are undemanding plants free from pests and diseases. *Digitalis* are often marketed as being resistant to both deer and rabbits. As with most plants, this depends on whatever else is available for the creatures to eat and I have known both deer and rabbits to munch away on all members of the foxglove family when nothing else is within range.

‘All foxgloves are suited to perennial meadows; repeating the same species will unify the area’

Digitalis purpurea are not solitary plants and are best either planted in groups to lift the eye above the surrounding plants or threaded in ribbons through an area, repeating their vertical lines. The slim upright stems of species such as *D. parviflora* Jacq. and *D. ferruginea* create an unrivalled dramatic presence that makes them popular in minimalist urban gardens. Both these species and *D. purpurea* are perfect partners for airy grasses, such as *deschampsia* and *stipa*, where the fine verticals of the *digitalis* seem to float on a froth of grassy flowers. In informal settings, such as herbaceous borders, these same plants can create a strong framework to enclose the rounded shapes of softer perennials. All members of the family are suited to perennial meadows and have been widely used by contemporary garden designers



Facing page: *Digitalis ferruginea*, the rust foxglove, sometimes re-flowers in autumn.

Above: Small-flowered, but enticingly beautiful: *Digitalis parviflora* Jacq. ‘Milk Chocolate’

in naturalistic planting schemes. When planted in a meadow, repeating the same species will help to unify the area.

Nurseries and garden centres are now obliged to alert customers to the potential risks posed by plants and the warnings on all foxglove plant labels are particularly alarming: ‘Danger: all parts of the plant are highly toxic.’ A skull and crossbones is often added for emphasis. It is astonishing that previous generations of children managed to survive contact with the plants unscathed. It is true that foxgloves are poisonous, particularly the leaves and, most potently, when the plant is setting seed, so, if you have very sensitive skin, do wash your hands after

handling plants. But it really shouldn’t need to be said that they are not to be eaten.

Herbalists have been aware of the effects of *digitalis* for centuries, but it was not until the 1780s that the English botanist William Withering described safe ways of using it. Although newer drugs are replacing digoxin, the chemical extracted from *Digitalis lanata*, it is still in widespread use as a treatment for some heart conditions. Far more people have benefited from foxgloves than have ever been harmed by them, but some growers suggest that faint-hearted gardeners are wary of the genus and are reluctant to plant them. What a loss, to not be able to welcome such beauty and charm into the garden! →

Foxy favourites

***Digitalis parviflora* Jacq.**

A native of the Mediterranean, this is a species that thrives in sunny places. Its slender spires are tightly packed with chocolate-coloured flowers from late spring to early summer. The petals have a pale-pink veining and the lower lip is mahogany. Although perennial, it is short-lived and usually expires after three, at most four, years. It will produce seedlings, or the crown of the plant can be divided in early spring. It grows to about 2ft tall

Digitalis ferruginea

Another short-lived perennial with 3ft-tall flower spikes in July and August. Commonly known as the rust foxglove, its flowers are much paler than the name suggests. It grows best in full sun and, after mild summers, it will occasionally re-flower in the autumn

Digitalis lutea

In contrast with the formality of the upright members of the family, the branching stems of this species tend to arch, becoming almost willowy and bringing a relaxed, loose feel to the border. The narrow tubular flowers are a pale-primrose colour that at dusk appear to be almost white. In the wild, it prefers full sun, but it will grow in semi-shade

Digitalis x mertonensis

The combination of masses of fat flowers on a relatively short 2ft stem makes for a chunky plant. The flowers are a dusky-pink colour and will appear from June through to August, flowering most prolifically in a sunny situation. Although a hybrid, this plant comes true from seed and is best treated as a biennial: after a couple of years, it tends to produce fewer flowers before finally expiring

***Digitalis purpurea* f. 'Albiflora'**

It was Gertrude Jekyll who first popularised this pure-white form of the native foxglove and, although there are other white cultivars, few can match the elegance and simplicity of the original species. The buds are cream-coloured and open to sparkling white flowers. As do all forms of *Digitalis purpurea*, it performs best in a partly shaded site

***Digitalis purpurea* 'Pam's Choice'**

Of the many cultivars of the common foxglove, this one stands out for its large, eye-catching, white flowers, which have a maroon splash of colour on the base of the lower petal. It grows to about 4ft tall and its flowers are packed along the length of the stem. Another cultivar, sold under the sing-song name of 'Elsie Kelsey', is identical 🌸



Above: *Digitalis purpurea* f. 'Albiflora', a pure-white form of the native foxglove, popularised by Gertrude Jekyll. Below left: *Digitalis purpurea* 'Sutton's Apricot' comes true from seed. Below right: *Digitalis lutea*, with its arching stems, gives a more relaxed feel to a border

