

Fritillaria - Maggie Campbell-Culver

Hullo everyone. This month I'm going to talk about the bulb called Fritillary, *Fritillarias*. It is one of the very few names which also describe an animal, in this instance, butterflies. The only one to be seen in Brittany is one called the Pearl Bordered Fritillary which goes under the lovely name of *Clossiana ephrosyne*.

As to the bulbs, there are about a hundred species of *Fritillaria* recorded in the latest edition of the RHS Encyclopedia, although, half a century earlier only just eighty were known. The genus is spread liberally between the temperate regions of the Northern Hemisphere with *Fritillarias* native to Europe having mainly *tunicated bulbs*, that is, they look like onions, while those growing on the American continent are *scaly*.

The most familiar of the species is the Crown Imperial, *Fritillaria Imperialis*. This is the orangey-red bloom that hangs its head downwards and can grow to about five feet, one point five metres. That has a foxy odour about it. To grow it needs full sun and good, deep, fertile soil and the bulb requires planting at least four times its' own depth. There is some confusion as to its' native habitat. It was long believed to be thought a native of Iran but then the Himalayas came to the fore but by 1996 it had been established that *Fritillaria Imperialis* was native from Southern Turkey to Kashmir. The plant, like the Tulip, was commonly grown in Turkish gardens and was one of the many plants introduced to Western Europe by that wonderful botanist Crucias (?).

The Persian Lily, as it was called, was quickly embraced by Northern European gardeners. That great gardener, Christopher Lloyd, described the smell as a mixture of garlic and fox. Nowadays, because of its' smell, and this may interest gardeners who have problems with moles, the bulb is promoted as a deterrent against them where its' efficacy is a matter of dispute though. Some people say it works and some people say it doesn't.

There is only one native Fritillary that grows in France and Britain, *Fritillaria meleagris*. Although very rare it is a protected species, so must not be picked or disturbed in any way. It is commonly known as the Snake's Head Fritillary. Its' claim to fame in England is that it has attracted the largest number of vernacular names. Over thirty different examples, stretching from Shropshire, where it's known, among many other names in Shropshire, as Dead Men's Bells, to Somerset, where it's known as The Mournful Bell of Sodom.

European species of *Fritillaria* forms a National Collection at the Cambridge Botanic Garden. Studying the list of *Fritillarias* available in the Plant Finder, there is a huge number of species available. Well over eighty as opposed to the very few cultivars and varieties listed. A sign, perhaps, that the genus is of an aristocratic nature and needs no further breeding to obtain a perfect specimen. The genus has a very wide habitat range and the RHS has developed four different cultivation requirements to suit them all. But, as Christopher Lloyd reminded us 'any plant that succeeds in being all things to all gardens is likely to be a dull plant'. Not so the *Fritillaria*, they should be much better known and we should all grow them.