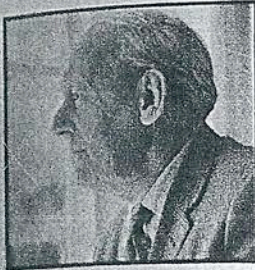


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Fritillaries

by

H. E. Bates



Fritillary, from the Latin *fritillus*, a dice-box, by analogy implies a chequer-board, and refers us in turn to the chequered pattern of the flowers of several species. Notable among them is our own snake's head fritillary, *Fritillaria meleagris*, with its lovely purple bells, speckled like a guinea fowl as well as a snake. Its native habitat is zealously guarded in several parts of England. There is also a chaste white form of this, quite unchequered. Both, greatly desirable, will naturalise easily.

Fritillary also gives us the names of several butterflies, the loveliest of which, surely, is the Queen of Spain fritillary, the syllables floating from the tongue like veritable airy wings themselves. Here again the chequered effect is implied.

In April, although my garden is rich with daffodils, tulips, hellebores, anemones and a score of other spring glories, there is absolutely no doubt that the most majestic, most talked-of thing in it is *Fritillaria imperialis*, a truly noble creature with its stems of nearly four feet and its imperial crown of hanging bells in shades either of orange-red or pure clear yellow.

You don't need to look twice at this striking thing to know that it belongs to the lily family. Its one disadvantage is that it has a slightly repugnant odour, though not to my senses as strong as, for example, *Cytisus praecox*. The answer to both these things is to plant them well away from the house, preferably against a dark background, so that they may be worshipped from afar. The Crown Imperial comes from fairly large bulbs, which should be planted in the autumn. Though not exactly cheap, I rate them as marvellous value.

Now I don't claim to have grown, or to be familiar with, all the species

I am about to mention; I only know all of them are on the market and a diligent search through catalogues specially devoted to the less common bulbs will seek them out. Of *Fritillaria meleagris*, already mentioned, there are four or five variations, Artemis having grey-purple checks, Pomona having violet checks on a white ground, and Saturnus, a large-flowered variety having bright red-violet flowers.

Several of these species come from North America, though a larger number originate in Eastern Europe and Asia Minor, indicating that some of them, like certain tulip species, need a good summer baking to prove successful.

It is also only fair to say here that the old oracle Reginald Farrer claimed that the fritillary family had on the whole rather a bad character or, as he put it in his own particular way, were of rather 'miffy temper'. Now my own way with plants of miffy temper is very simple—out! I have neither time nor patience to stand in prayer over sulkies, however rare, who refuse to spread their sweetness on the air. If they don't love me then I don't love them and swift divorce is the only answer.

Farrer was also decidedly cynical about certain fritillaries having 'bells' of dingy chocolate and greenish tones, which often appear transfigured by the enthusiasm of those who desire to get rid of them as 'rich purple' or 'amaranthine violet'. I take this to be a wise injunction to inspect the living flower before you buy, or in other words 'put not your trust in catalogues', the compilers of which all too often don't know the difference between scarlet and magenta.

However, here are a few more species to seek out. *F. pyrenaica* comes, as its name implies, from the Pyrenees. *F. acmopetala* has petals pale green inside, tipped with purple. *F. pallidiflora* comes from Siberia and has, according to one catalogue, yellow tulip-shaped flowers but, according to Farrer, beautiful solid white bells—take your choice. Farrer accords it 'a good sound perennial temper'.

Finally another word or two about the noble Crown Imperial. It has a flowering period of a good month or more, and its pendant bells throw off even the heaviest April rain. With me it has emerged quite unscathed from a week of extreme nastiness composed of gales, torrential rains and a touch of snow. You can't ask much more of a plant than that.

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