how to grow fritillaries

Imperial fritillaries are the first whopper garden bulb to flower in spring. You've got alliums, lilies and eremurus later, but it's the good old crown imperial which gives you drama early in the year. I love it for that and always remember it - huge healthy stems, shiny leaves and glamorous hanging bells - appearing en masse at the base of a yew tree in my parents' garden. It was a key moment of spring and for a sunny or lightly shaded bed, it's hard to do better.

Add the less well known, subtle and aristocratic Fritillaria raddeana and you have two winners. Raddeana is 3-4 feet tall - like an imperial fritillary - but with flowers in the most wonderful pale, lichen green. Both, unlike the exotic, sultry F. persica, which seems to need more of a baking, are easy and reliable and come up year after year.

There are many different imperial varieties, but last spring I fell for Fritillaria 'William Rex'. I love the soft red-brick colouring of its bells, in contrast to aubergine-coloured stems and bright, shiny green topknot and leaves.

This form gives you stronger growth, more flowers and even longer garden life than usual. It looks splendid circled with any of the early sultry-coloured tulips, 'Havran' or 'Antraciet'.

I also love the yellow imperial (which always flowers later than the orange forms in my garden) in a good zingy mix with the yellow, slashed red tulip 'Flaming Parrot'.

All imperial fritillaries have a slightly foxy smell - particularly on a sunny day - but I still like the odd one picked and brought inside in a tall, single stem vase; they last up to two weeks. All bulbs do best if you minimise the number of leaves you cut when you pick the flowers.

When the foliage is at the base of the plants, it’s easy, but when you cut imperial fritillaries, make sure you leave a short section of the leafy part of the stem to give the bulb a chance to make enough food to survive dormancy.

Snake's head fritillaries

Is there anyone who would not like a patch of grass - large or small - scattered with snake's head fritillaries, our own mini meadow?

"The fritillary looks like something exceedingly choice and delicate and expensive, which ought to spring from a pan in a hothouse, rather than share the fresh grass with buttercups and cowslips" (Vita Sackville-West).

Yet it does.

Seeing fritillaries carpet a field, every flower like a Moroccan lantern lit from inside, is one of those scenes so extraordinary, it is hard to register. You feel a Chelsea show garden designer must have been there the day before and put the whole lot in.

Where to grow

As a native, the snake's head fritillary is relatively easy to grow. You can place it at the front of a border - it
looks good with sun-tolerant hellebores such as H. sternii and Hellebore argutifolius - but its home is spring grass and you need to plant it in the next few weeks.

Unlike most bulbs, it's happy on heavy soils and that is where you'll still see it growing wild in April and May in the water meadows of Oxford, Gloucestershire and Suffolk.

It thrives with a bit of moisture and plenty of humus in the soil, but I have a friend who has it self-sowing on thin chalk, too.

So, planted right and helped along by the correct mowing regime, you can grow the snake's head in most soils. Having said that, if you have tried and failed, then F. acmopetala or michailovskyi are lovely alternatives in sun or partial shade.

Fritillaries Planting tips

- Planting any of these small fritillaries is easier if the grass is short, so mow once growth has slowed in the autumn and then plant. This also helps you see the flowers more clearly in spring.

- Avoid regimental spacing and scatter the bulbs from the bag with a sweep of your hand like a sower and plant each bulb where it falls.

- Plant all three fritillaries deep, at least 6-8in and the same sort of distance apart. To get the water meadow look, plant as many as you can. The easiest way to plant to this depth in grass is to use a bulb planter with a long handle like a spade.

- If you were planting crocus or narcissi like this in heavy soil, you’d add a little grit or spent compost to the hole, but not with these moisture-loving fritillaries.

- Just drop in the bulb and move on to the next, one per hole. As you cut the second hole, the first core of soil is dislodged and this can then be placed over your first bulb.

- In Bulb (Mitchell Beazley, £30), Anna Pavord recommends, when trying to naturalise bulbs in grass, to start them off in pots, five to a 4in pot. Plant the potfuls, disturbing the roots as little as possible, when the leaves first show in early spring.

- If you want them to self-sow, you must leave the flowers to set seed and not mow until late August at the earliest. The trouble with that is there may be things you don’t want - thistles or docks - also in the grass, so you’ll have to pick these out.

- Do not add any nitrogen fertiliser to your grass. This feeds the competing grasses more than your bulbs.

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