

Digitalis - Growing Guide

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Foxglove

The Common foxglove, *Digitalis purpurea*, is a native plant in English woodlands and hedgerows. After tree clearance which disturbs the soil or, anywhere that a bare patch of soil remains exposed, foxgloves are very likely to germinate. The seed will have lain dormant in the soil for decades or even hundreds of years only springing into life when conditions are right. As we have cleared large areas of *Rhododendron ponticum* to avoid infection by *Phytophthora ramorum* so these bare areas have been carpeted in foxgloves. These are biennial plants which flower and seed in enormous profusion giving a 'one off' display. Thereafter the seed is scattered onto the soil and, as grass cover re-establishes over the bare earth, here it will lay dormant for many years until the opportunity to germinate again presents itself.

Digitalis have hairy leaves which may cause skin irritation and all parts of the plant are toxic if ingested. Foxgloves in a vase should not be left in a bedroom overnight as even the scent can have unwelcome effects.

In all there are some 20 species of digitalis most of which are biennials or short lived perennials. They are all native to western and central Europe. Plant breeders have selected, developed and hybridised new forms of digitalis for the horticultural markets and, today, you can find whole stands of different varieties on display at Chelsea.

Improved forms of the Common foxglove are now available:

D. purpurea f. *albiflora* with its 4-6ft tall pure white flower spikes is a favourite. In a patch of wild foxgloves you will often find a few pure white ones. However, if you collect the seed of these they will have pollenated with other common pink ones and few seeds will come true. The white

forms need to be grown in isolation to ensure that only white foxgloves are the end result.

Digitalis purpurea 'Excelsior' hybrids present a mixture of cultivated (rather than wild growing) foxgloves with varying pastel shades. Grown in clumps these plants will produce a spectacular effect.

D. purpurea 'Sutton's Apricot' has unusual apricot-pink flowers and, although a biennial, can introduce a novel feature into a herbaceous border.

D. grandiflora, the Yellow foxglove, has golden brown flowers with red veins inside.

D. x mertonensis is a cross between *D. purpurea* and *D. grandiflora*. It is a robust and clump forming perennial and has spikes of pinkish-buff flowers. This variety comes true from seed.

D. 'Goldcrest' is another hybrid with attractive orange-yellow flowers with red overtones over a long period.

Burncoose Nurseries: Gwennap, Redruth, Cornwall TR16 6BJ

Telephone: +44 (0) 1209 860316 Fax: +44 (0) 1209 860011 Email: info@burncoose.co.uk

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