

Growing Gloves for Foxes



I started growing foxgloves about 10 years ago, and quickly fell in love...maybe it has to do with their heart-helping qualities, or maybe it has to do with the beautiful, non-demanding character of the plant. I'd always lusted after delphiniums, but soon found that they are creatures of the wind...they're here and gone, especially if there's a wind. Foxgloves, on the other hand, are biennial or perennial wonders. Their sturdy stems hold them erect even on my wind-swept site, and the tall columns of flowers lend a cottage air to any garden.

I started my affair with *Digitalis purpurea*, the lovely biennial with deep pink snapdragons sculptured on a stately 4' stalk. Digitalis, of course, is the heart medicine, and too much of it is as fatal as too little; the foxgloves are not the plant for the site where the elves eat the stems. But I own dogs and they've never been the least bit interested in having a healthier heart, so I've taken to growing foxgloves with abandon. *D. purpurea* led me to *grandiflora* and *lutea*, which are both more perennial, and yellow to boot. However, the flowers on these two are much smaller and more delicate, so they don't lend the pizzazz to the garden that *purpurea* gives. Then I tried *thlaspi*, which has a totally different growth pattern but maintains the lovely, deep pink bells of *purpurea*. *Thlaspi* is only about 24" tall, and the bells nod downward, but the leaves are pubescent with silvery long fur. Many of the foxgloves come from Spain, so I was a trifle worried that I was buying annuals...but *thlaspi* surprised me...it thrived in garden soil and disappeared in the rock garden. It seeded itself around.

Then I tried *ferruginea*...oh, heart be still...*ferruginea* is a totally different look. A column of slightly closed, sort-of-golden flowers rise to 4'. It reminds me of the women of the Middle East, with their closed faces and shawls, but it still has an imperial splendor about it. It doesn't seem to like severe, dry winters.

And then there was *laevigata*...slightly more open than *ferruginea*, with a white lip. It still has the gold of *ferruginea*, but it seems a little more forgiving of our climate.

Now I'm on to *obscura* (a cherry-gold combination), *nervosa*, *parviflora*, *lanata*, and *nevadiensis*. They may not be more than annuals here, but I love the exotic look of all these beauties, and seed is cheap.

There is a form of *purpurea* that is pure white, and it is a lovely addition to the semi-shade garden.

The only one that has been sort of a disappointment has been *mertonensis*...though it has strawberry blooms that are very large, it has sputtered in the garden. But I'm giving it a third chance, and maybe a fourth. According to *Hortus Third*, it is a cross of *purpurea* and *grandiflora*, so it should be hardy, so maybe I'm just not giving it the loving care it needs.

If you're not familiar with biennials, they are plants that form leaves/rosettes the first year, bloom the second, and then die. The most perennial of all of them seems to be *lutea*, although I've had seedlings and plants of *thlaspi* for about six years as well. Foxgloves usually form large basal rosettes, and the flowering stem can reach up to 5' if the plants are happy. *Grandiflora*, *lutea*, and *thlaspi* grow much shorter...to about 2' here, and tend to have less of a spire look to them than some of the others. All contain the drug digitalis, which is poisonous in larger doses, so if you have animals or children who will eat anything, this probably doesn't belong in your yard.

The seed is miniscule...like grains of fine sand, and the new seedlings are so small that hundreds fit in a 4" pot. Sometimes, if you sow the seed early enough (like January), *purpurea* may bloom the first year. There is even a cultivar called 'Foxy' that reliably blooms the first year. Foxgloves tolerate full sun to a half-day of shade. They add vertical accents to the garden and often have extended bloom if the first flowering stems are cut back when they fade. Often *purpurea* blooms in early June and again right at the end of the season. If you leave the last flowering stalk standing or shake its contents around the mother plant, you will have a continuous supply. *Purpurea* seems to like good garden soil; *ferruginea* seems to prefer drier conditions. But if you start foxgloves from seed, you will have enough babies to try them in lots of places. And if you grow them, then the foxes will appear soon after to try on their gloves.

—Jean Bawden

Jean Bawden operates Earthspirit Farm, 4385 Oak Hill Road. Open by appointment only; selling hostas, dwarf iris, Japanese and Siberian iris, peonies, shrubs, and daylilies. Call 835-8907 or e-mail bdn7458@mailbag.com.