

IMPERIAL SPLENDOUR

Alex Pankhurst

Gardens have timescales quite different from ours. Owners depart, new people move in and, unless they indulge in wholesale upheaval, bringing in diggers, landscapers and garden designers, the garden merely shrugs and carries on.

My immediate predecessors were no gardeners. Well perhaps that's unfair. They liked daffodils, hybrid tea roses and screening conifers, but otherwise they seemed to have little involvement. Yet certain flowers, planted by an owner goodness knows how far back, just carried on doing their thing. What did nature care who nominally owned the patch? It was the plants' territory now.

That first spring I was intrigued by a large clump of shiny leaves pushing through the soil in February. Growing fast to three foot tall, in mid-April they flowered. What a thrill, for they were crown imperial fritillaries, one of our oldest garden plants.

Fritillaria imperialis grows wild in Iran and Afghanistan, and was introduced to Europe from Turkey, where it was a valued garden plant. Reputed to have got its name because it was grown for the first time in Europe in the Imperial Gardens of Vienna, bulbs of it were brought to this country, via Holland, in 1580. Such a spectacular plant must have been a highly prestigious thing to grow, but gradually moved down the social scale until it became a traditional cottage garden plant: hence, I guess, the clump growing in the garden of my very un-grand cottage.



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Fritillaria imperialis



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The extraordinary pendulous
tear-drop nectaries

Mine were yellow, but there is also an orange flowered form. The flowers hang their bell-like heads, within which hang extraordinary drops of pearly liquid, suspended as if about to fall. They are, in fact, nectaries.

These curious 'teardrops' gave rise to a legend that the fritillary once grew in the Garden of Gethsemane. When Jesus was arrested, all the flowers bowed their heads in sorrow except for the fritillary, which was too proud of its green crown and beautiful, upright flowers. When gently reproved by God, it bowed its head and has wept tears of remorse ever since.

There is, however, something rather un-imperial about this beautiful plant. It pongs. "A mixture of mangy fox, dirty dog-kennel, the small cats' house at the zoo, and Exeter railway station", one famous garden writer wrote in 1914. What did he have against poor Exeter? But he hadn't finished. "Hunting folk enjoy this odour in their gardens", he added waspishly. I can't say I've ever noticed the smell, so it can't be that strong.

That's the past tense I'm using, because in the last few years the clump has become smaller and smaller. True, we've suffered droughts and a few wet summers, which the bulbs won't have liked. But then they must

have been growing there for the best part of a century, and so taken such things in their stride. What is new, however, is the accursed lily beetle. Fritillaries are members of the lily family, and I've become wise to the little red pest on my dwindling colony, and dispatch them swiftly whenever I find them.

F. imperialis is reputedly hard to get established. The big, hollow bulbs need to be planted in the autumn in a well-drained, limey soil, on their sides, to combat rot.

So if my old clump disappears, should I try and replace them? Oh yes, I think so - for the benefit of future owners.

❧ *First published in the Essex Group Newsletter, May 2019* ❧