

## Foxgloves



*Digitalis purpurea*

Our native foxglove is *Digitalis purpurea* and the typical form is a biennial, forming a rosette in the first year and a flowering spike in the second. Usually the flowers are pink, and the leaves are a crinkled grey green. The rosettes can make attractive winter features.

The name comes from finger, or digit, because the flowers can look like thimble-like and there are lots of common names such as Goblin's glove or Fairy fingers. The name 'foxglove' is said to derive from a Norwegian musical instrument, shaped like a stick of bells, rather similar to a Morris man's jingling stick. Seeds should be sown once the seeds are ripe, usually in early August, or you can sow foxglove seeds in March. When planting foxgloves use a good quality seed compost. Lightly press the seeds into the compost, but DO NOT

cover the seeds because foxgloves require light for germination. Plant in the ground in autumn or wait until the following spring if they aren't large enough. Allow plenty of space between plants as if they are overcrowded, they will not grow as tall as they could otherwise be.

Foxgloves prefer light shade and in the wild are usually seen in wooded areas. Their tall flowering height make them a good addition to a cottage garden border. Foxgloves bloom in mid-summer. They usually have pink or purple flowers, but garden varieties also come in yellow, white and rusty orange.

Foxgloves are extremely popular with bumble bees.

Foxgloves have been used medicinally as a cure for heart problems and dropsy, a serious disease of the 18th century. William Withering, a doctor from Wellington in Shropshire, wrote *An Account of the Foxglove and Some of its Medical Uses: with Practical Remarks on Dropsy, and Other Diseases* in 1785. He obtained his information from a gypsy herbalist who had successfully treated patients with dropsy - a lung condition that normally killed the patient. Digitalis emptied the lungs of fluid. Withering became incredibly wealthy, was sponsored by Charles Darwin, and has foxgloves on his grave at Edgbaston Old Church in Birmingham.

