



specialist nursery

Fantastic Mr Foxglove

When it comes to planting foxgloves in your garden there's more choice than you might think, thanks partly to Terry Baker, who grows dozens of different kinds at his Wiltshire nursery – and lots of other gorgeous plants, too

WORDS JAMES ALEXANDER-SINCLAIR PHOTOGRAPHS JASON INGRAM

In brief

WHAT Botanic Nursery, a small family-run business that's home to the National Collection of foxgloves.

WHERE Wiltshire.

SIZE 5 acres.

SOIL Alkaline loam.

SPECIAL FEATURES Apart from foxgloves, the nursery grows lime-tolerant plants and 'garden-worthy favourites'.

Owner Terry Baker grows more than 30 kinds of foxglove, including these cultivars of the native *Digitalis purpurea* – *Gloxinioides* Group (left) and 'Primrose Carousel' (right).





I am sitting under an umbrella with the sun shining down, cup of tea in hand, surrounded by a jumble of different plants. There are pots of *Brugmansia*, scatterings of infant salvias, some exotic eryngiums, some spectacular and unusual shrubs and a tall and a glossily trunked *Eucalyptus* (grown from seed, incidentally).

Outward appearances would indicate that we were sitting at our leisure in a well-stocked garden, but that would be misleading. Actually Terry Baker and I are in his nursery among crammed sale beds, brimming trolleys and, if I might say so, some slightly knackered old cold frames.

There are two sorts of nursery: the clinically efficient, with plants laid out in neat rows and nary a weed in sight. The other sort is a jumble of plants arranged in a pattern known only to the nurseryman. The latter have the charm, while the former are much easier to navigate. The Botanic Nursery in Wiltshire manages to combine the two: it looks delightful while producing huge quantities of high-quality and interesting plants. As Terry explains, “We do a lot of shows so we need to churn out an awful lot of stock.”

Foxgloves and other favourites

The nursery is best known for its National Collection of *Digitalis*, some of which are pictured overleaf. These are at their best during Foxglove Week in the first week of June, but other foxgloves carry on much longer than that.

Of 22 foxglove species, Terry has 20. Some are short, some tall, some evergreen; they are a pretty easy bunch to grow, though some are particularly good in shade, while others prefer hot, gritty soil or are best suited to rock gardens. Whichever way you shake it, there is a *Digitalis* here for every garden. Some are bred on the nursery but Terry has exacting standards. “If they don’t survive the winter well we reject them, no matter how attractive.” It’s a stern but ultimately sensible policy.

Unlike some National Collection holders, however, Terry is not obsessed with foxgloves to the exclusion of other plants: he also grows lots of asters, hellebores and eryngiums. For him it is mostly about a heartfelt wish to grow “plants that gardeners want to grow”. The nursery also has the largest selection of lime-tolerant plants in the country: “I think it is good for the gardener to know that, if they have a limey soil, everything that they buy here will thrive.”

Promiscuous passions

Terry has been running this nursery with his wife Mary for 25 years. Once upon a time it must have been a walled garden for an estate but when they took it over it was a defunct market garden that had been rather overtaken by nature. Terry is the latest in a line of four generations of head gardeners, so that sort of thing leaves him undaunted. ▶

1 Foxgloves look sensational in woodland plantings, borders and all sorts of other planting schemes; this one is backlit by the glowing orange-bronze young leaves of *Cotinus* ‘Grace’. For more foxgloves see overleaf.

2 Apart from foxgloves, owner Terry Baker grows lots of what he calls ‘garden-worthy favourites’, including ox-eye daisies (*Leucanthemum vulgare*) and rich, red-brown *Aquilegia* ‘Roundway Chocolate’.

3 The double poppy *Papaver somniferum* ‘Black Paeony’ is easy to grow from seed, according to Terry.

4 The umbellifer *Angelica sylvestris* ‘Purpurea’ is a biennial with purple-flushed stems and lime green flowers.

5 Terry describes himself as a compulsive propagator – preparing hundreds of small plants for sale each year.

6 *Astrantia major* ‘Hadspen Blood’ produces gem-like, deep red flowers from June to August.

7 Summers are a busy time for Terry, who has to keep the nursery ticking over and take lorryloads of stock to a series of flower shows all over the country.



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“ If they don’t survive the winter well, we reject them, no matter how attractive ”

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▷ His first passion was for woody plants, in particular for those with unusual variegations, and the plantsman's garden next to the nursery is packed with interesting shrubs; a *Viburnum cylindricum*, upon whose waxy leaves you can write, towers over a glowing *Syringa emodi* 'Aurea'. The lawn, however, would give a green-keeper palpitations – it is kept shaggy for the wildflowers and to provide voles for the three resident owls. "We try to run the nursery as sustainably as possible, so have come to an affable arrangement with the wildlife," says Terry. "Most are allowed free run of the place."

A prolific grower

Terry is one of those nurserymen who just can't stop growing stuff; he describes himself as a "compulsive propagator" and makes it all seem terribly easy and straightforward. There are greenhouses overflowing with oversized plants there "as propagating material", and loads of seedlings. "We do most of the sowing in January: everything in a coir mixture, as we gave up peat about eight years ago."

The range is impressive: it needs to be, as Terry's schedule includes pretty much every horticultural show in the country, from Malvern in spring to all the major RHS shows, county shows all over the place and even a couple in France. "Each show swallows a lorry-load of plants a day – if we're doing well." He is a glutton for this sort of thing and laments the passing of the RHS winter shows. "We used to meet some knowledgeable customers there and when the RHS stopped the shows their loss was a blow to many small nurseries."

Terry's nursery may have shaggy edges but you can rest assured that he is a gardener with a mission to provide plants "that enrich other people's gardens". Place yourself, your plant choices and your garden in his hands: they are among the safest in Britain. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

ADDRESS The Botanic Nursery, near Stonar School, Atworth, Wiltshire SN12 8HU.

TEL 07850 328756 WEBSITE <http://.botanicguru.co.uk>

OPEN Usually 9am-5pm in summer – please call to confirm.

EVENTS See the nursery's National Collection of foxgloves blooming during its Foxglove Week, 1-6 June.

SHOWS Buy plants from Botanic Nursery at a series of major events this summer, including Gardener's World Live in Birmingham (16-20 June), Cottesbrooke Plant Finders Fair in Northamptonshire (25-27 June – see page 10) and RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show in Surrey (6-11 July).

BBC James Alexander-Sinclair is a garden designer and broadcaster who co-presented TV coverage of the Chelsea Flower Show last month – see www.bbc.co.uk/gardening

12 fabulous foxgloves

Terry Baker on some of the most distinguished *Digitalis* growing at his nursery

1 *Digitalis lutea* – The small yellow foxglove grows wild in Mediterranean areas. 60cm spikes. Good in borders.

2 *Digitalis parviflora* – This species, from northern Spain, has escaped the nursery and now grows wild in the village. Perennial; about 1m tall.

3 *Digitalis purpurea* 'Pam's Choice' – Our best selling plant. This is a strong new variety. About 1m high.

4 *Digitalis purpurea* Excelsior Group – Really big trumpets that vary from white to brazen pink. up to 2m tall.

5 *Digitalis purpurea* 'Sutton's Giant Primrose' – This was thought lost until somebody found an envelope of seed in the back of an old bureau. 1.5m tall with large flowers.

6 *Digitalis purpurea* 'Sutton's Apricot' – It can change colour from seed but look for the dark veins on the back of the leaves to be sure. 1.5m high.

7 *Digitalis lanata* – The woolly foxglove flowers after most of its relatives, in mid to late summer. 60cm tall.

8 *Digitalis* 'Glory of Roundway' – A cross between *D. x mertonensis* and *D. lutea*. Sterile from seed. 70cm tall.

9 *Digitalis dubia* – This species, from Mediterranean areas, flowers all summer. Greyish leaves. 1.5m high.

10 *Digitalis purpurea* subsp. *heywoodii* – Pale yellow buds open into pure white flowers over silver leaves. Perennial. 75cm tall.

11 *Digitalis laevigata* – This is used to stony mountainsides, so hates being crowded in a mixed border. Perennial. Height 1m.

12 *Digitalis obscura* – the willow-leaved foxglove has lots of flowering stems. 45cm high.



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