

*Fritillaria meleagris*

[Synonyms : *Lilium variegatum*]

**FRITILLARY** is a bulbous perennial. Native to western Asia and to Europe, it has deep purple to very pale pink (rarely white) flowers with reddish-purple chequered markings.

It is also known as Bloody warrior, *Britheg* (Welsh), Checkered daffodil, Checker lily, Chequered daffodil, Chequered fritillary, Chequered lily, Common fritillary, Cowslip, Crowcup, Daffodil, *Dampelslilja* (Swedish), Dead man's bell, Death bell, Doleful bells of sorrow, Drooping bells of Sodom, Drooping lily, Drooping tulip, Falfalaries, Five-leaved grass, Folfolarum, *Fritillaire* (French), Fritillaria, Frits, *Frittelaria* (Italian), Frawcup, Froccup, Frockup, *Gewöhnliche Schachblume* (German), Ginny flower, Guinea flower, Guinea-hen flower, *Kievitsbloem* (Dutch), *Kirjopikarililja* (Finnish), *Korunka strakatá* (Slovak), *Kungsängslilja* (Swedish), Lazarus bell, Leopard's head, Leopard's lily, Leper flower, Leper's bells, Leper's lily, Madam ugly, Mournful bell of Sodom, *Mutafan lale* (Turkish), Oaksey lilies, *Pei mu* (Chinese), Pheasant lily, Pheasant's head, *Řebčik kostkovaný* (Czech), *Schachblume* (German), Shy widows, Snake-flower, Snakeheads, Snake's head, Snake's head fritillary, Snake's head lily, Snowdrops, Solemn bells of Sodom, Sulky ladies, Toad's head, Turkey eggs, Turkey hen, Turk's head, Weeping widow, Weeping willow, Widow veil, Widow wail, and Wild tulip; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of persecution.

Warning – the whole plant is potentially poisonous (the bulb especially so) and can effect heart function.

In Britain fritillary is considered to be endangered in the wild.

*Meleagris* is derived from Greek *meleagrido-* (guinea-fowl) component meaning 'spotted like the guinea-fowl'.

Apparently for some the flower's shape was suggestive of the warning bell carried by lepers (as well as the colouring of the disease itself) and this led to such names as Lazarus bell and Leper's lily.

In the mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century it was thought that it was a rare plant native to England but some authorities believe now that this protected species was introduced and has become naturalized in the Country. Earlier botanists believed that the fritillary had arrived on British shores with the Huguenots in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century as they fled to avoid religious persecution but the first certain recorded sightings of its growth do not occur before 1732. Despite this authorities often testify that fritillary was popular in both Elizabethan and Stuart England ie. 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries – which would be supported by those authorities who believe that the first known written wild record of the plant could be the 'crow-bells' (a name used for several flowers) mentioned in *The Natural History of Wiltshire* that was written by the English antiquary, biographer and folklorist, John Aubrey (1626-1697), when he says

.....grows abundantly a plant called by the people hereabout  
crow-bells, which I never saw any where but there. ....

The flowers are the focus of a tradition once familiar (even since the 2nd World War) in some English villages in the Thames Valley (between Thame and Aylesbury). On an early May Sunday, known locally as Frawcup Sunday, children dressed in their finery and garlands

of May flowers and visited the cottages of older members of the community with fritillary nosegays. These posies were given as a symbol of the impending warm sunshine and good harvests.

It has long provided inspiration for poets. One who succumbed to its beauty was the 19<sup>th</sup> Century English poet and critic, Matthew Arnold (1822-1888). In *Thyrsis* he wrote

.....  
I know what white, what purple fritillaries  
The grassy harvest of the river-fields,  
Above by Ensham, down by Sandford, yields;  
.....

Flowering chestnut trees (*Aesculus*) were by no means the only plants to be honoured with a special day on which their beauty was traditionally admired. Fritillary Sunday was celebrated in several English parishes in late April or early May when areas carpeted with the flowers would be gloried in by visitors.

The flower can also be seen depicted in the stained-glass windows of English churches – and even embroidered into the designs on altar cloths and pew cushions.

Although it is believed to have gained some reputation during the 16<sup>th</sup> Century for healing powers, today it is considered of no medicinal value.