

# Home/Garden

## Foxglove Digitalis: It's a biennial

### This plant needs two years to complete its growth cycle

Recently a reader asked me how to separate the baby foxglove plants that came up around her established foxglove without hurting the mother plant. I assured her that she could separate the babies and put them where she wanted them without worrying about damaging the old foxglove. It was going to die anyway.

Some people mistake foxglove *Digitalis* for a perennial because it self-seeds and once you have it, it may continue on forever. Still, it is a biennial, that is a plant which needs two years to complete its growth cycle. The first year the seed germinates and puts out leaves, survives the winter and during the second summer it sends up its flower stalk, sets and drops its seed which germinates, producing new plants even as the old plant is beginning to die. When these new plants send up their flower stalks the following year, some people assume it is the old plant that has come back again, as perennials do.

You will not find nearly the number of biennials available as you do annuals or perennials, but they should not be neglected when you plan your gardens.

You can buy many biennials, Canterbury bells, holly hocks, Sweet William and evening primroses at nursery centers in the spring and expect them to bloom that year. Or you can start your own seed in July with the expectation that you'll have bloom the following year.

If you grow your own biennials from seed, you should prepare the nursery bed carefully, just as you do the vegetable garden in the early spring. First choose a location that is sunny all morning or afternoon. If it gets some dappled mid-day shade that will protect the tender seedlings from the hottest summer sun, that would be ideal. Also locate the bed where it can be watered easily. Keeping the soil moist while the seeds germinate and become established is very important. The seedbed should not be any wider than you can reach from either side so you can keep it weeded and tended without stepping on the bed or dislocating your shoulder.

Cultivate, breaking up clods of earth and tilling in finished compost.

Since you will lose some plants over the winter, you can place your seeds closer together than you would put mature plants. Cover the seeds with enriched soil or compost, tamp down, water well and keep the nurs-

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Between The Rows

ery bed well watered. At the end of the summer, definitely before mid-September, you can move the biennial seedlings where you want them to bloom the next summer.

#### Canterbury bells

With all the improvements that have been made to plants, you will find that some biennials are also available in perennial form, so examine your seed packet carefully. Canterbury bells *Calycanthemum cup* and saucer bells grow two feet tall and are covered with the typical bell shaped flowers, many of which are fully two inches across. They like full sun.

As a member of the dianthus or pinks family, Sweet Williams are fragrant and have large dense flower heads of pinks, reds and white. They have very strong stems and make a good cut flower.

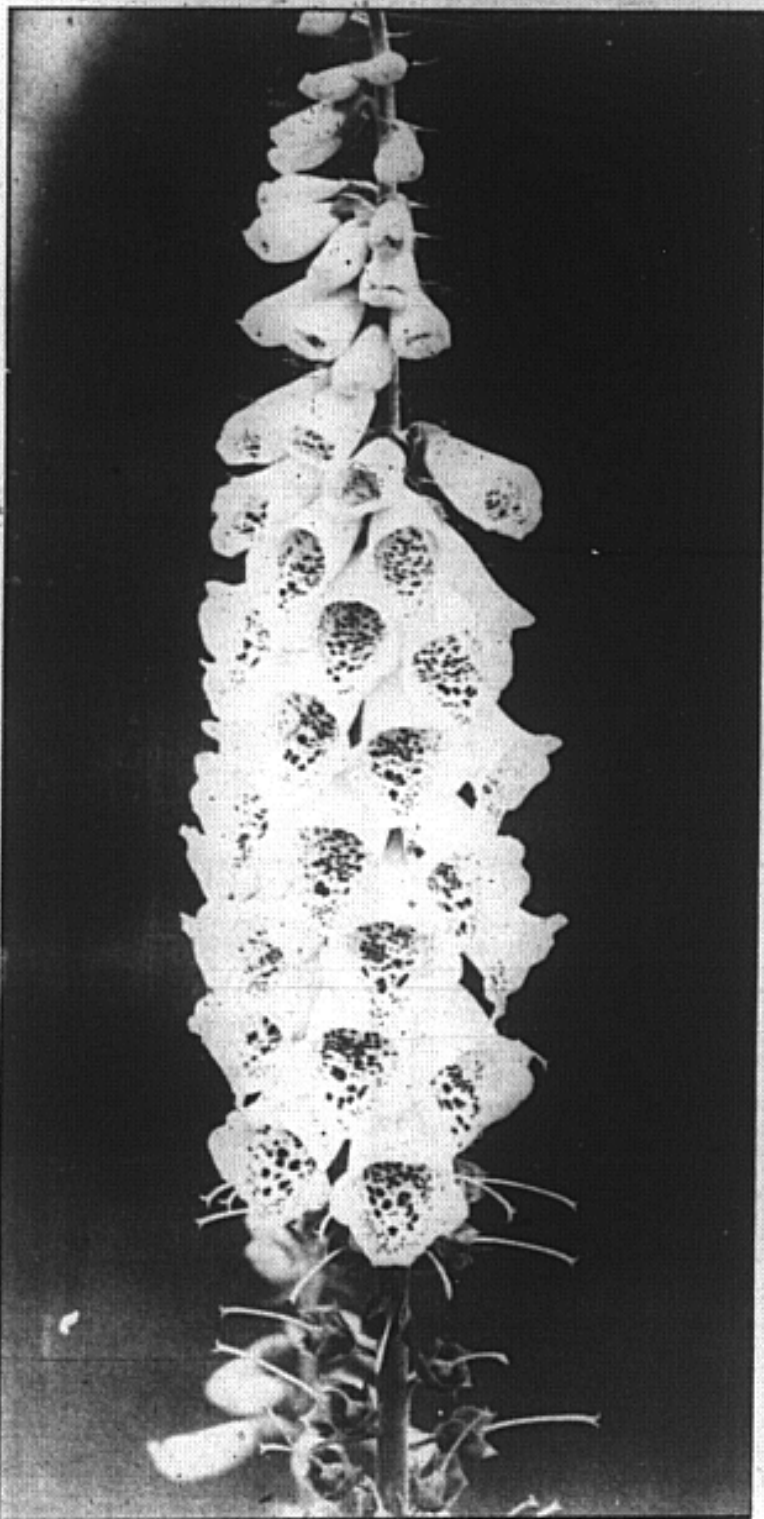
Foxgloves will tolerate some shade and prefer a cool moist soil. They are perfect for a woodland or semi-wild garden. They grow three to four feet tall, maybe more under ideal conditions, and the flower stalk is covered with dotted thimble shaped flowers. Properly known as *Digitalis*, foxgloves were harvested in ancient times and used medicinally. People still take digitalis today as a heart medicine, but with more consistent results, I suspect that miscalculations are what gave rise to its old name - dead men's thimbles.

#### Forget-me-nots

Forget-me-nots (*Myosotis*) is a biennial but will bloom in about six weeks after an early spring seeding. They self-seed freely, especially if they are planted in moist semi-shade. Once you have this lovely little flower in your garden, you'll probably have it forever.

#### Lunaria

Lunaria or money plant is commonly used in dried flower arrangements, although it's actually the translucent white seed pod, as fragile as a winter moon, not its flowers that make it so attractive.



The foxglove *Digitalis* is indeed a beautiful flower.

Recorder/Chuck Blake