



# The joys of spring

How lovely. March is here. It would have been so nice to have been able to hibernate during January and most of February for that matter. From now on there's nothing but countless horticultural treats to look forward to

ONE OF the joys of this month is the appearance of the fritillary in its various forms. Of these, the Snake's Head Fritillary (*Fritillaria meleagris*) holds a special place in so many gardener's hearts and at the same time the easiest to grow. So long as your soil drains freely and contains some organic matter so that it does not dry out too much in summer, any shaded spot will do. I was brought up with these purple or white beauties. They excelled around the base of a huge Plane tree where the soil did become very dry in summer and so they are tougher than the text books make out. The wonderfully exuberant orange or yellow flowers of *F. imperialis*, best planted towards the back of the border, give the garden generous and exotic dollops of colour towards the end of the month and into April with flowers as high as 3ft (1m) borne on sturdy, fleshy, stout stems. Make a note to plant these beauties this September.

As I keep on saying, the best way to learn about gardening is by your mistakes. One of the greatest errors I made was to plant snowdrops using dried bulbs in the autumn. I lost about 50 per cent. Ever since then I have always planted them 'in the green', just after they have finished flowering. They can be moved when still in flower without coming to any harm. So, if you have a semi-shaded spot on the lawn or an informal area where the grass is left to grow unchecked, areas that would improve with the presence of these heralds of early spring, there's no time to be lost. If you do not have any existing plants in your garden that can be moved, then I recommend that you buy pot-grown plants from a garden centre, and replant those. Snowdrops are gregarious and better planted in groups of about half a dozen, therefore.

I was strolling around Notting Hill early last summer and on the pavement was a florist



*Fritillaria meleagris*.

selling sweet peas at £1 a stem! I couldn't believe it. Surely, no summer is complete without sweet peas, irrespective of style of garden, and you can so easily grow them for a tiny fraction of that price. Many people sow seed in the autumn in a heated greenhouse as they swear that their relatively stronger root system gets them off to a better start when they plant them out in March, anyway those that have escaped the attention of mice. Those without a heated greenhouse can sow seed about now in lavatory paper cardboard centres crammed together for support in a box. The length of these tubes suits their deep root systems and when you plant them out the young plants experience far less root disturbance.

When I was digging up my parsnips during the cold spell I was reminded of film footage of the winter in 1947 (the year of my birth) when they could only be lifted successfully with the help of a pickaxe. All remaining roots should be lifted as soon as possible and stored in a cool and dry place in, preferably, sand, although dry compost is just as good. March is the time to plant

early potatoes. Harvesting is made all the easier if you plant them through a cross cut into black polythene as the tubers are produced close to the soil surface.

Asparagus can also be planted now using two year-old crowns. I was told by an old gardener many years ago that what this delicious crop likes most is fish offal at the bottom of the trench, something you might consider

if you live near the sea. If your allotment proves daunting to begin with, it makes sense to invite a neighbouring gardener to take on a part of it for you and he or she may well impart useful knowledge at the same time. ■

## UNDERSTANDING GARDENING : Monday, March 8 or Thursday, March 11

Roddy Llewellyn explains horticultural jargon in a way that is easily understood. Many people are put off gardening because they do not know where to start and because it is assumed they fully understand the meaning of words such as 'mulch', 'loam', 'cutting', 'pH' and 'sucker'. These seminars are designed to clarify such terms and to infuse the aspiring gardener with confidence, knowledge and inspiration. Tickets £70 each (two tickets £130). For more information visit [www.rodryllewellyn.co.uk](http://www.rodryllewellyn.co.uk) or call Sue Lane at Katherine House Hospice on 01295 811866.

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