

# flower

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## flowers for the heart

### The many merits of foxgloves

BY TROY RHONE

**T**HE WHIMSICAL FOXGLOVE (*Digitalis purpurea*) has brought joy to my heart for years. And as far back as the 1700s, foxglove flowers have also brought physical healing to hearts in need. The man credited with the introduction of digitalis into the practice of medicine was William Withering, who first used extracts of the plant to help with Dropsy. Even Dr. Erasmus Darwin, grandfather of Charles Darwin, wrote a poem extolling the good effects of this lovely flower. In our modern times, certain compounds found in the leaves are used to help in the fight against cardiac disease. And while its extracts prove beneficial, the plant itself—stems, flowers, leaves and all—is entirely toxic and should not be ingested.

**HISTORY AND FOLKLORE:** Digitalis has been around for centuries and stories of how it got its name are just as colorful as its flowers. The name 'foxglove' seems to derive from one of two stories told in Scandinavia.

The first one tells of fairies saving the foxes from extinction by showing them how to ring the digitalis bells to warn their kind of the danger of approaching hunters. The second tells of foxes putting on florets as gloves so their steps would be quieter when approaching the chicken coop.

In Wales, digitalis was called Goblin's Gloves because it was believed that hobgoblins wore the long bells on their fingers and they would impart magical elements to the wearer.

**ACCOMPANIMENTS:** Foxgloves are very beautiful on their own, but when accompanied with other flowers from the garden they can make a spectacular arrangement. Mix foxgloves in arrangements with other flowers that may be blooming in your garden, such as, snapdragons, delphiniums, dahlias, irises, and lilies-of-the-valley. ✨

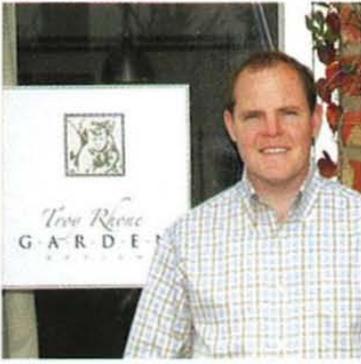
Contact Troy at [troy@troyrhonegardens.com](mailto:troy@troyrhonegardens.com) with questions about foxgloves or other gardening topics.

#### PLANT FACTS:

- ▶ Blooms May to June.
- ▶ Most foxgloves are biennials. This means they have vegetative growth the first year and flower the second year.
- ▶ Foxgloves need to be staked before the florets open. Once they open the weight of the flower can break the stalk.
- ▶ Foxgloves do best in morning sun light with afternoon shade.
- ▶ Remove the center flowering stalk after it blooms. This will enable the side stalks to have more energy to grow and bloom.
- ▶ Cut just before the blooms reach their peak.

#### SELECTIONS OF DIGITALIS:

- ▶ 'Pam's Choice': Grows 36"-48" stately stems covered with bell-shaped white florets accented by deep maroon throats.
- ▶ 'Foxy' mix: Grows 24"-36" tall. Colors are soft pastels. This mix flowers five months from planting seed so it can be used as an annual.
- ▶ 'Excelsior' mix: Stalk is 36"-48" tall with long, large flowers! Florets are borne on all sides of the spike rather than on one side as on other foxgloves. They also face outward rather than downward.
- ▶ 'Alba' is a 36"-48" spike of white flowers that lacks the normal spotting on throats of the florets.
- ▶ 'Primrose Carousel' 30" true to seed yellow with splotches in the throat. Florets swirl around the stem.
- ▶ 'Camelot' Mix: Rose, White, Lavender, and cream flowers on a tall 40" stem.
- ▶ Strawberry foxglove (*Digitalis X mertonensis*) Grows 30"-36" tall with its unique strawberry-red florets
- ▶ Yellow Foxglove (*Digitalis grandiflora*) Grows 24"-36" tall with bright yellow flowers.



**TROY RHONE** ▶ Troy Rhone is a full-time Garden Designer who designs courtyards and gardens throughout the Southeast, with main offices in Birmingham, Alabama, and Rosemary Beach, Florida. He has worked closely with the American Horticulture Society, and is currently working with the Garden Conservancy's Open Days. In his spare time Rhone also works as a Horticultural Therapy volunteer and studies gardens and architecture, in addition to writing our regular gardening column, Garden Party, which highlights foxgloves this month (page 39).