

## Marsh Gardens Newsletter

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- Apologies for the lack of a newsletter for last week: I was out of town packing boxes in Philadelphia, and also making a trip to Kentucky to play music at several of the Derby festivities. I did place a bet, but my horse came in dead last. Other than that, I had a great time.
- The work on replacing the electrical conduit planned for the OML greenhouse was supposed to have been undertaken by now, but I see no progress has been made. I guess we will play this one by ear. I have a call in to physical plant, requesting an updated schedule.
- We have had few takers for outside space here at the gardens. We are in discussion with a student group who is interested in organic vegetable production, and are in need of a site for their garden for this year only. This same group, the Environmental Coalition, will be initiating a compost project on some space along the back edge of the Marsh Gardens.
- If anyone is interested in reading the strategic long range plan for the Marsh Botanical Gardens, please let me know, and I'll make a copy available.
- The weather is warming up slowly, but the greenhouses have been getting very much hotter here, necessitating shade cloth being put down for some of the units.
- Outside in the gardens, we have been mulching trees, thereby protecting them somewhat better from the mowers. We are also continuing to install labels for trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants. As well, mowing has commenced in earnest, so if you visit and hear the tell-tale sounds of a string-trimmer, riding mower or push-mower, you'll understand why we can't always answer the phone on the second ring.
- Our cactus and succulent collection just received a small shipment of new plants over the weekend, and Dave has been busy potting them up.

This week's Plant of the Week comes courtesy of Vivian Irish, who contributed the writing and the picture. This is the perfect manifestation of the column; a forum for anyone to contribute in essay, poem and/or pictorial form, their interest in plants, botany, land use and ecological issues, and even ethnobotanical matters. So without further ado, I give you Vivian's contribution...

I have submitted the Fritillary as this week's plant of the week, in honor of the Fritillaries blooming in my garden right now. The genus *Fritillaria*, in the lily family, contains approximately 100 species. These mostly originated around the Mediterranean, Turkey and Southern Europe. Several *Fritillaria* species are grown as ornamentals, including *Fritillaria imperialis* (the Crown Imperial Fritillary), *Fritillaria meleagris* (the Guinea Hen Flower--my favorite!) and *Fritillaria persica* (Persian Fritillary). All the Fritillaries have nodding pendulous tulip-shaped flowers with a distinctive (and some say unpleasant) musky odor. The bulbs are poisonous and also have the same rank stink. From a geneticist's point of view, Fritillaries are noteworthy because they have the highest known DNA content, with a genome size reported to be roughly 25 times that of humans.

Fritillaries share a name with a group of brush-footed butterflies. The Latin name, *Fritillaria*, translates to a dice-cup used in gambling, and somehow this is thought to reflect the

checkered patterns that are apparent on the petals of the botanical Fritillaries and on the wings of the airborne Fritillaries. Given our present day interest in Iraq, I just discovered that the name for *Fritillaria imperialis* in Farsi translates to 'Tears of Mary'. Apparently, of all the flowers, only the proud crown imperial refused to bow its head during the Crucifixion. As a consequence, it has "bowed" and "wept" ever since.



Despite Vita Sackville-West's declaration that the Guinea Hen Flower is a 'sinister little flower', its graceful nodding blooms have always charmed me. Obviously, though, given its other epithets (the snake-head fritillary or leper's lily) many are in agreement with Sackville-West's pronouncement. Despite this disdain, they are lovely little flowers, with blooms in a soft white or a musty wine purple with the characteristic checkered pattern. The species name, *meleagris*, comes from the Latin word for guinea hen (with their checkered feathers), hence the plant's common name.

According to the Herbal of Clusius (1601) Fritillaries were 'herbs of healing' although Fritillaries do not figure prominently in European traditional remedies. However, Fritillaries have been used in Chinese herbal medicine as an antitussive. Clusius introduced Fritillaries to Holland, where their bulbs continue to be propagated to today. To digress a bit, Carolus Clusius, a physician in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, was largely responsible for making Holland the bulb capital of the world. He was a serious botanist who collected a variety of bulbs, including tulips and fritillaries. In 1592 he became a member of the faculty of the University of Leiden, as part of a Dutch effort to make Leiden a prominent University and expand Holland's dominance of the European scene. It was in Leiden that Clusius expanded his collection, embarked on breeding experiments, and sowed the seeds (excuse the pun) for the mania for bulb growing that swept through Holland.

Fritillaries are perennials that bloom in April and May. They prefer well drained soil and can tolerate light shade. They are obviously easy to grow, as they have survived in our garden for years now! We have enjoyed them in our perennial border, where their flowers dangle above the *Pachysandra* and other groundcovers.