

The Archibald Archive – Genus Guides

EREMURUS

The giant asphodels or foxtail lilies belong to a magnificent genus of hardy plants (in Liliaceae or Asphodelaceae, if you wish to 'split' this family) spread from the Lebanon and Turkey through to the western Himalaya but centred on Central Asia, where they extend northwards to the Altai. They are not the easiest of perennials to manage in UK gardens. These are mainly steppe-plants, adapted to a dry climate of extreme cold in winter, usually with deep snow-cover, and considerable heat in summer. They are tolerant of very low temperatures when dormant but their new growth is vulnerable, if their noses emerge too early, so spring growth may need some protection both from late frosts and slugs in milder climates. While best suited to gardens in the drier, more continental climates of central Europe or the Rocky Mountain states of the USA, many can be very successfully grown in a well-drained, sunny situation in the UK, especially in the drier east. Several species provide well-established displays at the RBG, Edinburgh, in Scotland.

We grow them well for seed in our fully-ventilated, netting-sided polytunnel mainly to keep off the Welsh rain and give them a summer rest. They are totally temperature-hardy in such a situation and we have never had any damage to early growth in these drier conditions. We usually also have some seed from Janis Ruksans, who grows these in a climate more suited to their needs. Their massive, fleshy, octopus-like roots need time to establish but most will flower in 3-4 years from seed, which is best sown from late summer to early winter, though we have found seed of most sown in midwinter will germinate satisfactorily.

Nomenclature: There is no single account dealing with the entire genus. The few species in Turkey and Iran offer no great problems in identification. Per Wendelbo's work on the species within the 'Flora Iranica' area is both competent and thorough but for the great mass of species in the Central Asian republics, we are dependent on accounts in Russian, dating from the work done during the days when these areas were part of the USSR. Our own knowledge of this genus is still rudimentary. Moreover, the species can be difficult to identify accurately as colonies can often show evidence of introgression or hybridization. While certainly not claiming to be in any way authoritative on the genus, our Latvian friend Dr. Arnis Seisums has offered to be of help in sorting out any problems, if he can. As he both speaks Russian fluently and knows their natural habitats intimately, we should be more than happy to trust his determinations. We shall have any doubtful names checked by him as we expand our involvement with these fascinating plants.

Further information: There is no publication for gardeners dealing with this genus. Articles in gardening magazines tend to cover one or two species and their hybrids. They generally emphasise the ignorance surrounding the genus in cultivation rather than display any great knowledge of it. 'The Bulb Book' by Martyn Rix and Roger Phillips includes some fine photographs of Eremurus in the wild with, as usual, brief, accurate notes.