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Wildflowers—Chocolate Lily ~ Brenan Simpson

A few years ago, on a warm May afternoon, my wife and I were walking along the cliffs with a friend named Jerka, who was visiting us from Czechoslovakia. After a while we came across a scattering of flowers, whose mottled brown ball-shaped blooms swung from eight inch stems, above long, narrow leaves. Jerka stopped and knelt down beside them.

'What do you call these?' he asked. Now we could have given him any of several common names—Chocolate lily, Rice root, Mission bell and so on, but the name which immediately came to my wife's mind and which she spoke out loud was the one most commonly given to the cultivated garden varieties of this particular species. 'Fritillary,' she answered.

'That's what we call it back home, too', Jerka replied, 'Fritillaria.'

And that's the botanic name of our lovely and endangered Chocolate lily, *Fritillaria lanceolata*.

I always like to know the reason why a particular plant has been given its special botanic name, partly out of mere curiosity but also because it helps me to remember it. In the case of the fritillaria, however, the origin is open to some doubt. The word 'fritillus' is thought by some to be the latin for a dice box, but since there are no pictures to be found of the kind of boxes that the ancient Romans kept their dice in, nobody is certain how they might

have differed from other small boxes to the extent that they earned a name of their own, nor in what way they might have resembled part of this flower. In a book printed in France in 1583, it is claimed that a druggist in Orleans, Noel Capperon by name, was the person who gave this plant, which had been known as *Flos meleagris* until then, the name fritillaria and that this was because the pattern of spots on the petals resembled a chequered pattern often painted on old dice boxes. Fourteen years later, the English herbalist John Gerard gave his opinion that a fritillus was 'the table or board upon which men plaie at chesse'. He also came up with various other common names for the plant, such as 'Turkey-hen', 'Ginny (Guinea) hen' and 'Chequered daffodil', this last name obviously referring to one of the yellow varieties of the plant. Our local expert, Dr. Lewis J. Clark, thought that the dice box description might refer to the shape of the seed capsule or to that of the flower itself.

So there we are. All I know for sure is that, whenever I see this pretty flower in bloom, I think of Jerka.

Brenan's wildflower articles are also published as a book *Flowers at My Feet: West Wildflowers in Legend, Literature and Lore.* ✍



Photo: Brenan Simpson

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