

# Reach for the sky

Tom Stuart-Smith marvels at the towering plants that punctuate his patch. Photograph: Francesca Yorke

**P**lants that grow fast and tall have a special appeal for me. It is partly that, at 6ft 5in, I am an outsized specimen myself, so I occasionally prefer to look at a plant in the face than to creep around the garden on my hands and knees in order to get an eyeful of detail.

It's the process of these prodigious plants getting there that is perhaps the biggest thrill, as the unbridled energy of spring transforms sunlight and air into stalk and flower in a headlong rush for height. On my well-drained soil, it's a close race between *Eremurus* 'Joanna' (a giant foxtail lily, pictured) and *Ferula communis* (wild fennel). I have a dried eremurus flower hanging in the house at a full 13ft, picked at the end of June last year as a vast, turgid white spike. It looks like a fossil from another era. Its descendants are slowly increasing in the garden, swaying in the breeze a good 4ft above anything else. Before I learned its potential dimensions, I made the mistake of putting it in someone's cutting garden, and the flowers grew so huge they couldn't be got through the door.

The fennel is as large, but more fickle. It erupts into a frothy tumulus of leaf in late winter and then there is a short interlude of suspense when you wonder if it is going to do its thing. This year it hasn't, but last year three plants sent up a flower that started as a clubbed fist before opening out into a starburst of tiny yellow florets. It's all over after mid-summer, leaving a gaping hole as a poignant reminder of its splendour.

Several other plants make up my

early summer rapid-reaction force. *Macleaya cordata* is a beautiful but rampant liability. Its lobed, grey-green leaves are in a shapely class of their own, and its airy plumes of buff and pink reach 12ft in late summer. By this time, *Inula racemosa* forms giant, virile clumps through the main part of the garden. In last summer's rain, the leaves were 4ft long and a foot wide, with 9ft spikes of rank yellow daisies. At the moment, it is gathering its energy for the big push and the great clumps of leaves are very handsome. If you're looking for a plant that punctures the bubble of good taste, this one is for you.

Of course, it is good to throw the thugs into perspective by having a few diaphanous delicacies around. *Thalictrum dipterocarpum* is as insubstantial as it is possible to be at 7ft with a cloud of mauve in August. The double-flowered *T. delavayi* 'Hewitts Double' flowers a little later and longer, but lacks the microscopic elegance of the single, with its thousands of tiny, buttercup-like hanging flowers. *T. elegans* 'Elin' is even larger, a pale cream blur over glaucous leaves. It's wonderful set against the towering weight of *Eupatorium maculatum* Atropurpureum Group 'Riesenschirm'.

Some of these plants are a little slow to fill the space allotted to them and in the meantime the ground is taken up by earlier flowering cranesbills, aquilegias, hesperis, cowslips and other humble beauties which can be pulled out later or left to eke out a living in the shade.

## GARDENING BLOG

Have you got room for a giant foxtail lily in your garden? Share your tall tales at [guardian.co.uk/gardening-blog](http://guardian.co.uk/gardening-blog)





## What to do this week

### THE LEAN SEASON

Are your delphiniums recumbent? Do your lupins lean? Proper gardeners will have put discreet supports in place way back in the mists of spring - foliage emerges through these, creating a natural yet upright look. The tardy could now go for the regimental bamboo-cane-up-the-back support, but that's not much better than losing the lot to a freak gust of wind. A tripod of shorter canes that meet a third of the way up the flower stalk will hold them secretly steady.

### LAWN AND ORDER

If you have dying brown patches on your lawn, chances are chafer grubs are at work on the roots - if they take a liking to your lawn, they'll return and multiply each year, so see them off now. To identify, cut a U shape, peel it back, and rootle around in the top few inches of soil - you're looking for white, c-shaped grubs with nasty little front legs. A biological control from [greengardener.co.uk](http://greengardener.co.uk) kills them organically, but needs applying in the next two months.

### READER OFFER

Lavender 'Hidcote' has a compact, neat habit that marks it out for hedging and edging. Its bright, violet flowers make it especially pretty, and it likes full sun and well-drained soil. Readers can buy 10 small lavender 'Hidcote' plants for £14.95 or 20 for £24.90 (prices inc UK mainland p&p); plants supplied as 4cm plugs. To order, call 0330 333 6851, quoting ref GUPW190. Delivery within 28 days.

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