

Aconitum napellus

[Synonyms : *Aconitum ambiguum*, *Aconitum ampliflorum*, *Aconitum anglicum*, *Aconitum autumnale*, *Aconitum cammarum*, *Aconitum firmum*, *Aconitum linnaeanum*, *Aconitum pyramidale*, *Aconitum vulgare*]

MONK'S-HOOD is a perennial. Native to Asia, central Alps, Pyrenees and northern Europe (including Britain) it has hood-like, dark blue or violet flowers with numerous stamens. It is also known as *Aconit* (French), *Aconite*, *Aconit napel* (French), *Aitoukonhattu* (Finnish), *Äkta stormhatt* (Swedish), *Apolloniakraut* (German), Asian monkshood, Auld wife's huid, Autumn aconite, Bear's foot, *Blauer Eisenhut* (German), *Blauer Sturmhut* (German), Blue helmet flower, Blue rocket, *Capuce de moine* (French), Common monkshood, Common monkshood of Europe, Cuckoo's cap, Cupid's ear, *Cwcowll y Mynach* (Welsh), Dog's bane, Dumbledore's delight, *Eisenhut* (German), Elijah's chariot, European monkshood, Flapdock, Friar's cap, Garden monkshood, Garden wolf's bane, Grandmother's nightcap, Grannies mutch, Helen's flower, Helmet-flower, *Katbish* (Bengali), Luckie's mutch, *Mitha taleya* (Urdu), *Mönchskappe* (German), Monk's cap, Monk's cowl, Mousebane, *Napel* (French), Old wife's hood, Poison aconite, Pops, Soldier's cap, *Stormhatt* (Swedish), *Sturmhut* (German), True monkshood, Turk's cap, *Ukonhattu* (Finnish), Venus' chariot, Venus' chariot-drawn-by-two-doves, *Visha* (Sanskrit), Wolf root, and Wolfsbane; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of chivalry, deadliness, illicit love, knight-errantry, lustre, misanthropy, remorse, vendetta, and 'your disdain will kill me'.

The flowers are pollinated by bumble-bees.

Warning – the whole plant (especially roots and at flowering time the leaves) is poisonous (even a small dose, homoeopathic remedies excepted) as it affects the central nervous system. Monk's-hood can cause initially a burning sensation on the tongue, stomach and skin, restlessness, slow pulse, inco-ordination, muscular weakness and partial paralysis. This can be followed by convulsions, diarrhoea, vomiting, abdominal pains and within up to 8 hours sudden death from respiratory or heart failure. Under British Law the plant is characterized as a 'prescription only medicine'. Fresh it is believed to be poisonous for livestock particularly cattle, horses and goats. Dried it is said not to harm horses.

Monk's-hood is a protected species in some areas.

The leaves of monk's-hood have been confused with those of garden parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*). While the poisonous roots of monk's-hood can be confused with those of the non-poisonous American sweet cicely (*Osmorhiza longistylis*), horseradish (*Armoracia rusticana*), turnip (*Brassica rapa*), garden radish (*Raphanus sativus*) and parsnip (*Pastinaca sativa*), and also the poisonous roots of beaver poison (*Cicuta maculata*), of fool's parsley (*Aethusa cynapium*), of hemlock water-dropwort (*Oenanthe crocata*), of hemlock (*Conium maculatum*), of pokeweed (*Phytolacca americana*) and of white bryony (*Bryonia dioica*).

Napellus means 'small turnip or turnip-rooted' with reference to the shape of the roots.

Monkshood is a description of the hooded shape of the flowers, and the name Wolfsbane arose from its past use as wolf bait. The 1st Century Roman natural historian, Pliny the Elder (23-79) said the plant was named after the Black Sea port of Aconae.

Greek myth tells not only how monk's-hood sprang from the black venom that dribbled from the mouth of Cerberus, the three-headed dog who stood guard at the gate of Hades (and was brought on a momentary visit to earth by Hercules) but also of its use by Hecate, the moon-goddess and goddess of the Underworld (and of witches and enchantment) when she poisoned her father. The old stories also tell of the elderly men, considered to be infirm and of no 'use' to the State on the Island of Ceos, who were condemned to drink it. The ancient Chinese used the plant as an arrow poison and bait for hunting and war, as did the Europeans. It was also used by soldiers to poison water supplies which otherwise could have been relied upon by an advancing enemy. In some European countries it was given to condemned criminals.

Authorities note that it was once thought by certain European herbalists that the celebrated Arab philosopher and physician, Avicenna (980-1037) had required any patient suffering from monk's-hood poisoning to eat a mouse which had been fed on the perennial. It seems however that this cure was a source of debate and was an example of incorrect translation of Arabic text. According to an un-named 'illustrious' doctor who participated in the argument, and who practised in Pavia near Milan, such a prescription would have been impossible as mice would not consume monk's-hood and the actual antidote was 20 flies which had been allowed to parade all over the plant.

Monk's-hood numbs the senses and can induce the impression of flying. This and its not inconsiderable reputation provided the foundation for its association in the Middle Ages in Europe with witches. They were believed to have used it as one of the ingredients (with deadly nightshade, *Atropa belladonna*) in their 'flying ointment' which was supposed to have been smeared on their bodies and broomsticks and was believed to have made them invisible – and in Germany, especially, enabled them to transform themselves into birds and animals, including owls, geese, cats and hares. At least one of the formulae are still known today and over the years scientists have made attempts to investigate these claims even as recently as the 1960s. Experiments in the 1920s suggested that some of the ingredients could encourage auto-suggestion in support of the German rumours for instance which could thus lead to the sensation of the growth of fur or feathers from the body.

Its dangerous qualities have been recognized for centuries as witnessed by the fact that Marcus Ulpius Trajanus (c.53-117) one of the most popular Roman Emperors, decreed that its growth was punishable by death. Then nearer the present day in the mid-1590s these same qualities are compared with the lethal effect of gunpowder by the famous English playwright, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) in Part 2 of *Henry IV*

That the united vessel of their blood,
Mingled with venom of suggestion
(As, force perforce, the age will pour it in)
Shall never leak, though it do work as strong
As aconitum or rash gunpowder.

While in 1603 a fellow dramatist, Ben Jonson (1572-1637) employs a common and often fatal belief then popular in England that some poisons were antidotes for others. In his Roman tragedy, *Sejanus*, he writes

I have heard that aconite
Being timely taken hath a healing might
Against the scorpion's stroke.

In northern European folklore the flower is said to bloom only where according to the district Saxon or Danish blood has been spilt.

Monk's-hood is depicted in many of the old illuminated manuscripts.

Despite its known poisonous nature it was popular in European gardens in the 17th Century.

During that period also it was introduced to North America where it became especially fashionable in the 1890s and can still be found growing in gardens there today. Medicinally, herbalists used monk's-hood to treat snake bites and as an antidote for poisoning. It also had some value for the 13th Century Welsh physicians of Myddvai. But monk's-hood only started to make a name as a medicinal plant in the 18th Century in the Western world when it was primarily used for the treatment of feverish conditions, epilepsy, gout, rheumatism, paralysis, pain and neuralgia, and also as a heart and nerve sedative. Today the Chinese still prescribe monk's-hood as the main ingredient for the treatment of shock and heart disease. In the West monk's-hood is also used by the pharmaceutical industry in some proprietary medicines, and it is also found in homoeopathic treatments. It is the birthday flower for 9th September.