

Digitalis purpurea

[Synonyms : *Digitalis purpurea* var. *gloxiniiflora*]

FOXGLOVE is a perennial (grown as a biennial). Native to western Europe (particularly the Mediterranean) it has rose-purple flowers.

It is also known as American foxglove, Bee-catchers, Beehives, Blobs, Bloody bells, Bloody fingers, Bloody man's fingers, Bluidy man's fingers, Bunch of grapes, Bunny rabbits, Bunny rabbit's mouths, Butcher's fingers, *Bysedd cochion* (Welsh), *Bysedd y Cw^n* (Welsh), *Claquet* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), Clothes pegs, Common foxglove, Cottagers, Cottagers throatwort, Coventry bells, Cowflop, Cowslip, Deadman's finger, Deadmen's bellows, Dead men's bells, Deadmen's thimbles, *Digitale pourpre* (French), Digitalis, *Digitalo purpura* (Esperanto), Dog's finger, Dog's lugs, Dragon's mouth, Duck's mouth, Fairy bells, Fairy caps, Fairy fingers, Fairy gloves, Fairy hat, Fairy's cap, Fairy's petticoats, Fairy thimbles, Fairy weed, Finger cap, *Fingerborgsblomma* (Swedish), Finger flower, Finger hut, Finger root, Fingers, Fingers and thumbs, Finger tips, Flapdock, Flop-a-dock, Flopdock, Flop-poppy, Floppy dock, Flops, Floptop, Floss docken, Folk's glove, Fox-and-leaves, Fox docken, Foxes gloew, Fox fingers, Foxflops, Foxter, Foxy, Gap-mouth, Gloves of Mary, Gloves of our Lady, Goblin's thimble, Gooseflops, Granny bonnets, Granny's gloves, Green poppies, Green pops, Harebell, Heartbush, Hedge poppy, Hill poppy, King Edward, King's elwand, Ladies' glove, Lady's fingers, Lady's slipper, Lady's thimble, Lion's mouth, Long purples, Lusmore, Lust more, *Menyg ellyllon* (Welsh), *Meuran nan caillich mharbha* (Irish Gaelic), *Meuran nan daoine marbh* (Irish Gaelic), *Náprstník červený* (Czech, Slovak), *Ouothelle dé brébis* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), Pop-bell, Pop-dock, Pop glove, Pop-guns, Pop-ladders, Poppers, Poppy, Poppy-dock, Poxwort, Purple foxglove, Rabbit's flower, Red foxglove, *Rohtosormustinkukka* (Finnish), *Roter Fingerhut* (German), Scabbit-dock, Scotch mercury, Snapdragon, Snapjack, Snaps, Snauper, Snoxum, *Sormustinkukka* (Finnish), Thimble finger, Thimble flower, Thimbles, Throat root, Throatwort, Tiger's mouth, *Tilpushpi* (Hindi), Tod-tails, *Vanlig fingerborgsblomma* (Swedish), *Vingerhoedskruid* (Dutch), Virgin's fingers, Virgin's glove, Wild mercury, Witches' bells, Witches' fingers, Witches' gloves, and Witch's thimble; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of insincerity, stateliness, and youth.

Warning – the whole plant is poisonous and can only be taken internally under the supervision of a qualified practitioner. The touch of the plant on bare skin can sometimes cause rashes, headaches and nausea. Internal consumption of any part of the plant can cause abdominal pain, diarrhoea, disturbed vision, drowsiness or mental disturbance, irregular heartbeats, nausea, tremors, convulsions and death. In Britain, this is a prescription only medicine. It is avoided by livestock because of the bitter taste and smell.

The flowers (there can be up to 80 in one spike) are pollinated by bees. A single plant can produce 1-2 million seeds.

Purpurea is Latin (purple-coloured).

It is thought by some that the name Foxglove may come from the Anglo-Saxon 'foxes-glew' or 'fox-music' which would then liken the flower's shape to an ancient musical instrument, a tintinnabulum (a ring of bells on an arched support). Others suggest that it is a reference

to the little folk or fairies and comes from Folks glove. Until 1542 the foxglove had no name in Greek or Latin. The Germans called it *Fingerhut* meaning ‘thimble’.

In Britain in earlier centuries there was a belief that the foxglove could only be picked with the left hand from the northern side of a hedge. Elves were said to have left their fingerprints (the mottling) on the flowers, and a northern legend tells how foxes were given the flowers by evil fairies to wear as gloves on their paws to help them creep up quietly on chicken runs.

To dream of the foxglove is said to indicate luck in love.

The foxglove is an emblem of the Scottish Farquharson family.

The flower is associated with the 6th Century St. Nectan to whom five churches in Devon and Cornwall are dedicated. A legend of according to some authorities relatively recent origin tells how half a mile from his home St. Nectan managed to catch up with thieves who had stolen two of his cows. He admonished them and tried to convert them to Christianity.

They thanked him by killing him and cutting off his head – and it is told how St. Nectan then carried his own severed head back to his hut and how a path of foxgloves emerged behind him as they sprang up wherever drops of blood fell as he progressed.

An unusual domestic use has been recorded for these flowers. In north Wales there was a period when it was fashionable to give stone floors a mosaic-like appearance. This was achieved by rubbing the stone with foxglove leaves to darken the lines.

A useful tip has been noted for flower arrangers. If foxglove leaf tea is added to the arrangement’s water, it will extend the life of the cut flowers.

Foxglove flowers can be used to obtain a yellowish-green dye.

In the past the flower stalks have stood in for parasol handles.

The plant came to be known by some of the North American Indian tribes and records note that both the Hoh and Quileute Indians included the flowers in ceremonial decorations.

One of the symptoms of a formally recorded experience of foxglove poisoning mentions that after a man had drunk some tea made from the leaves he saw yellow halos around objects. Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), the Dutch post-impressionist artist, received medication that included digitalis and twice he painted his physician holding a foxglove plant. It has been suggested that foxglove poisoning may account for the appearance of halos and the predominance of yellow in his later works.

Medicinally, the foxglove seems to have attracted relatively little attention from the ancient Greek, Roman or Arab physicians. A few later records indicate that some early European herbalists, including the 13th Century Welsh physicians of Myddvai, recommended it for various ailments such as colds, fevers and fluid retention or for some forms of tuberculosis. An ointment of the bruised leaves was believed to be helpful for cleaning ulcers and old sores, while the plant (boiled in wine) was considered to provide an admirable expectorant.

In 1650 foxglove was included in the London Pharmacopoeia but this does not seem to have encouraged any greater use – until the intervention of Dr. William Withering (1741-1799) who published *An Account of the Foxglove* in 1785. In this he introduced foxglove as a drug for treating cardiac disease. In the 16th Century in the English county of Shropshire foxglove tea (which generally included 20 or more other plants besides the foxglove) was being used as a folk treatment for fluid retention. During the 1770s Dr. Withering, a local man who had been educated in Edinburgh, was asked to visit an elderly lady who had used this remedy successfully to cure herself of dropsy (fluid retention). He identified the foxglove ingredient as the significant component and over the following years researched the practice and made a scientific investigation of the plant. From this he concluded that the digitalis in the foxglove had improved her blood circulation and kidney function which in turn cleared the body fluids that had built up.

Not content with the treatise (from which subsequent research sprang) Dr. Withering also displayed poetic prowess in the following description of the effects he had observed from using foxglove on his patients.

The Foxglove's leaves, with caution given,
Another proof of favouring Heav'n
Will happily display;
The rapid pulse it can abate,
The hectic flush can moderate,
And, blest by Him whose will is fate,
May give a lengthened day.

The pharmaceutical industry uses the dried leaves of this species on a commercial basis today to make heart drugs..

Today Western orthodox medicine uses the drug extracted from this and the woolly foxglove (*Digitalis lanata*) to treat heart disorders. Foxgloves are also used in homoeopathic treatments.