

Stachys officinalis

[Synonyms : *Betonica bjelorussica*, *Betonica brachyodonta*, *Betonica danica*, *Betonica fusca*, *Betonica glabrata*, *Betonica officinalis*, *Betonica peraucta*, *Stachys betonica*, *Stachys monieri*]

WOOD BETONY is a perennial. Native to Europe and Asia it has pink to purple flowers. It is also known as *Betonica* (English, Italian, Spanish), *Betonie* (Dutch, German), *Betonika lekárska* (Slovak), *Betony*, *Bidny*, *Bishop's-wort*, *Bitny*, *Bukvice lékařská* (Czech), *Common betony*, *Common hedgenettle*, *Devil's plaything*, *Echter Ziest* (German), *Épiaire bétoine* (French), *Gebräuchliche Betonie* (German), *Gemeiner Ziest* (German), *Humlesuga* (Swedish), *Humlesyka* (Swedish), *Läkebetonica* (Swedish), *Läkebetonika* (Swedish), *Lousewort*, *Purple betony*, *Rohtopähkämö* (Finnish), *Spiked betony*, *Stakio oficina* (Esperanto), *Wild hop*, *Woundwort*, *Zehrkrout* (German), and *Ziest* (German); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of surprise.

The flowers are pollinated by bees.

Warning – the root should only be used under the supervision of a qualified practitioner as it can cause vomiting and violent diarrhoea.

Wood betony is a protected plant in the Irish Republic under the Flora Protection Order 1987 and in Northern Ireland under the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985.

Officinalis means 'of the shop (usually the apothecary's or herbalist's)'. Certain plants used for medicinal purposes, whether of actual or legendary value, were kept readily available and acquired this name.

From the time of the ancient Egyptians wood betony was believed to have mystical properties in addition to any medicinal attributes and this magical aura persisted and spread. The ancient Greeks were familiar with wood betony too. Although more of its earlier history is now known the Roman natural historian, Pliny (23-79), who was a prolific writer although only 37 books of his *Natural History* survive today, credited the Vettones (an old Celtic tribe from what is now central Spain who are believed primarily to have been horse dealers) with discovering wood betony's qualities.

There is no doubt however of the plant's high standing. Some few years before Pliny's birth Antonius Musa, who was physician to Augustus (63 BC-14 AD) Rome's first emperor, wrote a long treatise on wood betony's virtues, and in the following centuries the Italians upheld this respect for the plant to such an extent that it earned the saying. there
sell your coat and buy betony.

The Anglo-Saxons for whom it was one of the most important magical plants relied upon it for curing nightmares. For them it was one of the Nine Sacred Herbs [with chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*), crab apple (*Malus baccata*), fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare* var. *dulce*), greater plantain (*Plantago major*), mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*), stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*), thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*) and watercress (*Nasturtium officinale*)] that could give protection against evil and it was worn around the neck for this purpose. In the Middle Ages because of its continued high medicinal and spiritual repute it was not only grown by the Christian monks but was also to be found in churchyards and gardens. It had been noted that the vine tends to turn away from wood betony and this observation (surely shades of the Doctrine of Signatures) led to the use of the plant in a popular

remedy for hangovers.

In Christian legend wood betony's name is said to celebrate Beronice who was healed by Jesus of an 'issue of blood'.

Wood betony will give a dark yellow dye.

Medicinally, it was believed to be of value in the treatment of many illnesses ranging from haemorrhaging to digestive ailments and coughs, colds and headaches, and it was also one of the plants taken during periods of fasting.

Today, although it is used in homoeopathy, there is some controversy over its true medicinal value. Thus apart from occasional use in folk medicine wood betony is mainly employed as a flavouring in herbal tobacco mixtures.