

*Verbascum thapsus*

[Synonyms : *Verbascum schraderi*, *Verbascum simplex*]

**GREAT MULLEIN** is a biennial. Native to Europe and Asia it has fragrant strong-yellow coloured flowers that have stamens with white hairs.

It is also known as Aaron's club, Aaron's flannel, Aaron's rod, Adam and Eve's flannel, Adam's flannel, Agg-leaf, Ag leaf, *Bantamaku* (Punjabi), Beggar's blanket, Beggar's stalk, Big taper, Blanket herb, Blanket leaf, Blanket mullein, Blanket weed, *Bouillon-blanc* (French), Bullock's lungwort, Bull's ears, Bunny's ears, Candelaria, Candleflower, Candlewick, Candlewick mullein, Clot, Clote, Clown's lungwort, Common mullein, Common mullen, Cow lungwort, Cow's lungwort, Cuddy-lugs, Cuddy's lungs, Devil's blanket, Devil's tobacco, *Divizna malokvětá* (Czech), *Divozel* (Slovak), Donkey's ears, Duffle, Fairies' wand, Felt, Feltwort, *Filtbladet Kongelys* (Danish), Flannel, Flannel-flower, Flannel jacket, Flannel leaf, Flannel mullein, Flannel petticoats, Flannel plant, Flannel weed, Fluffweed, French poppy, Fuzzy mullein, *Gidar-tamaku* (Hindi), Golden grain, Golden rod, Goosegrass, *Gordolobo* (Spanish), Hag leaf, Hag's taper, Hare's beard, Hedgetaper, High taper, Hig-taper, Ice leaf, Indian tobacco, Jacob's staff, *Jang-litamak* (Urdu), Jesus blanket, Jupiter's staff, *Kleinblütige Königskerze* (German), King's taper, *Kungsljus* (Swedish), Lady's candle, Lady's flannel, Lady's foxglove, Lady's taper, Lamb's tongue, Lamb's wool, Light of the Lord, Longwort, Lucernaria, Lungwort, Miner's candle, *Molaine* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Molène* (French, French-Canadian), Moses' blanket, Moth mullein, Mullein, Mullein dock, Old man's flannel, Our Lady's candle, Our Lady's flannel, Our Lady's torches, Our Lord's flannel, Our Saviour's flannel, *Pannog Melyn* (Welsh), Peter's staff, Poor man's blanket, Poor man's flannel, Poultice weed, Rag paper, Sea cabbage, Shepard's club, Shepard's flannel, Shepard's rod, Shepherd's club, Shepherd's staff, *Sirkyn y Melinydd* (Welsh), Snake's head, Snake's plover, Soldier's tears, Sweethearts, *Tabac du diable* (French-Canadian), *Tapr Mair* (Welsh), *Tapso* (Esperanto), Torches, Torch lily, Torch weed, Torchwort, *Ukontulikukka* (Finnish), *Vanligt kungsljus* (Swedish), Velvet dock, Velvet leaf, Velvet mullen, Velvet plant, Velvet poppy, Verbascum, Virgin Mary's candle, White mullein, Wild ice leaf, Woollen, Woolly mullein, Wound-weed, Yellow-flowered mullein, and Yellow mullein; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of good nature, and take courage.

The flowers open individually for a day.

Warning – all parts except the flower are mildly poisonous and authorities recommend that it should be taken only in small doses. The fine hairs should be removed from preparations made with the leaves as these can cause unpleasant irritation. It is rarely eaten by grazing animals because of its irritant hairs.

*Thapsus* is a reference to Thapsus which may have been a seaport, now Ras Dimas in Tunisia, Africa, or an ancient settlement on what is now Sicily's Magnisi peninsula, or a Greek island.

Some authorities suggest that the common name Mullein is derived from *moleine* (the Old English word) which itself is said to come from a Latin word *malandria* meaning 'blisters

or pustules on the neck, particularly on horses' from which the veterinary term 'malanders' is said to be derived.

Great mullein appears in classical Greek legend. Homer (8<sup>th</sup> Century BC) the celebrated Greek epic poet, relates how Odysseus is given great mullein by Hermes to protect him from Circe's spells.

Records indicate that hundreds of years ago the plant was revered for magical qualities. It was alleged that Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa (63-12 BC) claimed that the fragrance of the leaves could overpower demons. [It was he who helped Caesar Augustus (63 BC-14 AD) to gain power as the first Roman emperor. He served under Caesar as a Roman commander and statesman and was destined to be a brother-in-law of Caesar as his third wife, Julia, was one of Caesar's sisters.] Certainly during the Middle Ages it was known as Hag's taper because some authorities suggest it was believed to be an important ingredient in witches' charms and potions and (like the ancient Greeks and the Romans before them) people were still drying the long bare stem and dipping it in tallow to make torches and lamp wicks. (The large leaves were also used in this way.) In England these torches were carried at various functions and ceremonies, especially funerals.

In North America various Indian tribes came to be familiar with great mullein. Authorities note that some Indian tribes used the woolly leaves as lining to insulate their moccasins against the cold – and early settlers learnt of this practice and placed the leaves similarly in their stockings. It is said that in North America great mullein can still be used for making wicks today.

The plant was held in sufficient esteem by one or two North American tribes that it featured in ceremonial ritual. For the Thompson Indians it was the whole plant that played a part, whereas Isleta Indians smoked only the leaves.

Apart from any use as a human medicine great mullein came to the aid of a few of the North American Indians in veterinary medicine, including the Rappahannock for whom it was sometimes of particular value in treating their cattle. Some parts of the Navajo Indian tribe used it for their horses – and all Navajo Indians acknowledged it as a sheep medicine.

Great mullein was also absorbed into the human medicinal repertoire of many North American Indian tribes. The Iroquois and Hopi smoked the dried leaves in a tobacco mixture to ease convulsions, while the Menominee, Delaware and Malecite tribes all used the plant as a remedy for lung problems generally. Babies in the Iroquois tribe were given it as a laxative, the Atsugewi used it to cause sweating, and the Potawatomi employed it as a stimulant. While Cherokee Indians turned to it as a remedy for glandular problems, diphtheria, female disorders and fluid retention, the Iroquois Indians used it to treat blood diseases, diarrhoea, mumps, piles, toothache and earache. Catawba children received a root decoction to ease croup, and the root was also used for teething children by the Abnaki tribe. Some Chippewa prescribed it for heart problems, Nanticoke and Iroquois Indians both used it to ease fever, and the Mohicans turned to it for easing sore throats. It provided a cough remedy for the Creek, Mohican, Thompson, some of the Navajo, the Delaware and Cherokee Indian tribes, and it was a cold cure for the Mohican, some of the Delaware, the Shinnecock, Thompson and Atsugewi tribes. Both the Iroquois and Salish tribes valued it as a treatment for tuberculosis, and it was used by the Penobscot, Micmac, Iroquois, Potawatomi and Mohican Indian tribes to treat asthma. For pain the Cherokee took a potion in which this was an ingredient – whereas Catawba Indians relied upon a leaf poultice. The plant was applied to skin disorders by many tribes including the Malecite, Thompson, some of the Delaware, the Iroquois, Catawba, Zuni, Rappahannock, Cherokee and Micmac, and wounds were treated with it by the Catawba, Malecite, Micmac and Atsugewi Indians.

The whitish hairs covering this plant were dried and used as tinder.

The plant provided veterinary medicine, particularly for treating lung diseases in cattle (especially a form of tuberculosis). The seeds have been employed by poachers to stupefy fish. They are slightly poisonous and they threw them ground into the water.

In Roman times ladies dyed their hair a golden colour with an infusion of the flowers – and a very old authority stated that a soap made from the ashes of great mullein would restore grey hair to its original colour.

Like moth mullein (*Verbascum blattaria*), great mullein was also included in Dr. W.J. Beal's 1879 experiment – and these seeds germinated after 100 years' dormancy.

In some parts of India the seeds are still consumed as an aphrodisiac.

Nowadays the leaves are dried for use as an ingredient in herbal tobacco mixtures, including some for cigarettes that are smoked to relieve asthma. Although great mullein is generally collected from the wild for medicinal use, the cultivated plant also retains medicinal value. In Ireland it used to be cultivated prodigiously in gardens for remedies for treating some forms of tuberculosis.

Medicinally, great mullein according to some authorities has not been as popular with herbalists as other closely related species. Yet it was recommended for treating many respiratory disorders (including asthma, bronchitis and tuberculosis) diarrhoea, coughs, colds, toothache, cramp, earache, gout and wind, as well as being applied externally to treat burns, some skin diseases, frostbite, bruises, piles and not least a wart remover. Today great mullein is generally employed in accompaniment with other plants in remedies for the treatment of respiratory disorders (particularly bronchitis and catarrh) and is used externally for healing wounds and treating inflammation. In homoeopathic remedies it is valued especially for the treatment of migraine and earache. Great mullein can also be an ingredient in some proprietary medicines.

It is the birthday flower for 22<sup>nd</sup> January.