

## Cuckoo Pint *Arum maculatum*

### What's in a name?

This particular plant has over 150 local names. The most well known include lords and ladies, Jack or Parson in the pulpit, Devils and Angels and Red-hot-poker.

### Botany & Ecology

Cuckoo Pint is a common woodland plant of the Araceae family. The leaves have the shape of an arrow head and it is often speckled with black irregular spots. The upright poker or spadix is initially wrapped in a green hood or spathe. There is a ring of tiny male and female flowers which are positioned low on the spadix, often out of sight. These flowers do emit a very unpleasant smell which is attractive to the midges that pollinate them.

In the autumn these flowers develop into bright red or orange berries which ripen after the leaves and spadix have withered away. These berries are extremely toxic. Small mammals and rodents do find the spadix quite attractive and the plant can often be seen with nibble marks on it. The root-tuber, which is often 12" (300mm) below ground, may be very big and contains starch.



### Folklore

During the centuries, many country tales have been associated with this plant. Often, they alluded to amorous suggestions due to, perhaps, the colour and phallic shape of the spadix. This could explain the use of the name 'cuckoo' while the term 'pint' comes from the old English word for penis. It was believed to be an aphrodisiac and in some areas it was even believed that a girl could get pregnant simply by looking at this plant.

Its pollen glows faintly at night which makes the pale green spathe look quite noticeable against a dark background. The Irish believed them to be the lamps of the fairies.

### Folk Medicine

The berries of the plant are poisonous and they have never been used in any form. However, the leaves were squeezed to extract the juice; this was then used to burn off warts and other growths on the skin. This practice was particularly popular during the mid-17th century when the plague was prevalent. The roots of the plant were dried and made into a powder, which was then used to alleviate rheumatism. The Irish also used the root powder to treat palsy (paralysis).

In the 18th century, the juice was distilled and applied to the face as anti-aging treatment while the juice of the root was used to help cure asthma, ruptures, scurvy and wind. The modern herbalist stopped using it at the beginning of the 20th century.

Outside the realms of medicine, it was noted that tubers contained starch and during the Elizabethan period, the starch was used to make the long collars firm and upright. However, due to the high corrosive properties of the juice, this practice was soon stopped because ladies, who were required to launder the clothing, suffered painful effects.

\*Please note, readers should take advice from a qualified doctor or herbalist before using plants as a cure for ailments.

