

## Foxglove *Digitalis purpurea*

### What's in a name?

The name of Foxglove derives from the Old English 'foxes glofa'. However, it is believed that the name 'foxes' was actually meaning 'fairy'. In Gaelic, the plant was called 'lus nam ban-sith', which means 'the fairy woman's plant'.

### Botany & Ecology

This plant takes two years to mature. In the first year a rosette of leaves, but no stem, is sent up. In the second year, one or more flowering stems are sent up, reaching 3 or 4 feet high. The life of each flower is approximately six days. However, a single plant can produce up to two million seeds.

This is a favourite flower of the honey-bee and the plant relies on this species for pollination. The bees push their way up the bells or gloves to collect the pollen near the seed ring and by working through, from bottom to top of the stem, they fertilise each flower of the plant.

Smaller insects also visit, particularly those seeking shelter in the drooping flowers in cold or wet conditions. However, this plant is not browsed by other animals as it is poisonous.



### Folklore

The name of the plant, Foxglove, is believed to be related to an ancient belief. It is said that foxes used to wear the bells/gloves of the plant on their feet so that their footprints could not be heard when walking through the undergrowth in search of prey.

The reference to fairies appears again in several European cultures where the mottled prints inside the bell shaped flowers was described as or believed to be the hand prints of the fairies or elves.

### Folk Medicine

The Foxglove is poisonous if digested and so the leaves were once used as a rat poison in some agricultural areas. However, there is a chemical in the leaves (digoxin), which in the 1700's saw the birth of its use in a drug to help cure ailments of the heart. This has since been developed synthetically and is widely used in modern day pharmaceuticals.

Prior to this, folk practitioners used the plant to treat new wounds or infected sores. The leaves were bruised and tied on with a light bandage.

The juice was also applied to help cleanse and heal old sores. It was also made into an ointment which was then rubbed into the scalp to alleviate flaky scabs or the 'king's evil' aka Scrofula (a swelling of lymph nodes in the neck).



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