

What's in a name?

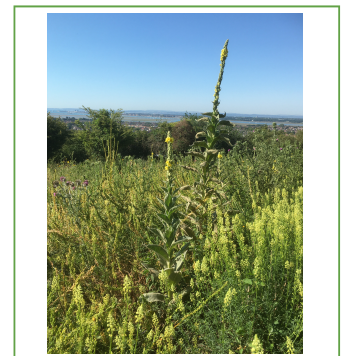
Mullein is derived from the French word for "soft" which is a direct reference to the large hairy leaves which are velvety to the touch. 'Great' refers to the significant height to which it will grow (2m).

This plant had a plethora of common names during the 19th century many of which have since died out. The most common names included Donkey's ear, Hare's beard, Adam's flannel and the Andrex Plant. The latter refer to the frequent use of the leaves by many across the world as toilet paper.

**Botany & Ecology**

Mullein is part of the Figwort family and others include the Foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*) and Snap Dragon (*Antirrhinum majus*). Like the Foxglove, it is a biennial and both produce a large rosette of furry leaves in the first year. After flowering in the second year, it often dies.

The plant grows well in bright sunny places and prefers sandy or chalky soils. It is most frequently found in places where the soil has been disturbed by human or animal activity but not tilled. It produces well over 1,000 seeds and each flower will blossom for only one day. It can self-pollinate if an insect doesn't do the job in such a short window of opportunity. The seeds may lay dormant in the soil for up to 100 years.



The flowers do provide nectar which attracts many different types of our native bees including the Honey and Bumble bees. However, the quantity available in any one flower is minimal.

Folklore

For many, this plant was considered a potent charm against demons, even though it was believed to be used by witches and warlocks in their brews. It was also believed that witches, in their incantations, used candles which contained a wick made from the hairs from the leaf. The association with light and candles is reflected in an agricultural superstition. Farmers would cut and dry the long stems and dip them in suet to make torches which were then lit and put in livestock sheds as protection from evil spirits.

Folk Medicine

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the flowers and leaves of Mullein were infused and prescribed to sooth coughs and congestion and loosen phlegm. This was given to both humans and cattle. Modern herbalists continue to offer this to treat bronchitis.

It also has very mild sedative properties and the leaves were used to make a tea to be drunk before bedtime if the patient was suffering from a cold. The hairs on the leaves were removed first as they would aggravate the throat. Mullein tea with a bit of milk was also prescribed as a treatment for diarrhea.

A sweetened infusion of the flowers and carefully strained was also used to treat colic.

During the same time period, poultices of mullein leaves was used as a treatment for hemorrhoids. During the 19th century, bruised mullein leaves infused in olive oil provided a useful treatment for frostbite and burns. The warmed oil was also dropped into the ear to treat ear infections. Research in the 20th century found that the leaf does have anti-bacterial properties although this has never been exploited on a large scale.

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