

## Devil's-bit Scabious

*Succisa pratensis*

Odhrach bhallach



Devil's-bit Scabious is a flowering plant in the family Dipsacaceae. It differs from other similar species in that it has four lobed flowers, whereas Field Scabious has five lobes.

Its leaves are un-lobed (unlike Field scabious), and are arranged in opposite pairs. The plant can be confused with Greater Knapweed; however Knapweed has leaves that are alternate, not opposite. Male and female flowers are produced on different heads, the female being smaller.

The rounded and nodding, purple-blue flower heads of Devil's-bit Scabious can be found in damp meadows and marshes, and along woodland edges and riverbanks. It is in bloom between July and October, its pincushion-like flower heads provide a very important nectar source for our late flying butterflies, bees and hoverflies. It is the main larval food plant of Ireland's only protected insect, the Marsh Fritillary butterfly, whose eggs are laid in groups on the underside of the plant. The critically endangered bee, *Andrena marginata* is also dependent on the plant as females provision their nests with its pollen.

Devil's-bit scabious has been used as a dye, a seasoning, tea, and medicinally to treat scabies, eczema, fever, weeping wounds, and even syphilis and plague. According to legend the Devil was not best pleased with the ways that people were using this versatile plant and tried to destroy it by biting the root off, and its vertical rootstock certainly looks like it has been bitten from below as it rots from the tip as it ages. Devil's-bit scabious is useful not just to people: as one of summer's latest-flowering species it is vital to help insects prepare to survive winter, especially butterflies, but also bees, and beetles.