

Foxglove

Digitalis purpurea

Lus mór



Foxglove belongs to the family, *Scrophulariaceae*, the figwort family. It can be found locally abundant throughout Ireland's different habitats, except for the midlands. It thrives in partial sunlight to deep shade in acid soil, in hedges, woodlands, rocky mountain slopes and on sea cliffs. It quickly colonises disturbed ground such as cleared woodland, and in many of our abandoned unfinished building sites.

In its first year, this biennial plant produces a rosette of large, oval, textured green leaves covered with a downy silvery hair from which the flowering spike emerges a year later. In its second year it flowers the whole summer, from June to August. Reaching 1.5m, it can have from 20-80 hanging blooms in clusters on one side of the stem. Its 4-5cm bell shaped flowers are pinky-purple with spotted throats. Relying on honey bees and bumble bees for pollination, the projecting lower lip of the flowers are perfect landing platforms.

Every part of this native wild flower is known to be poisonous and people were afraid to bring it into their houses or even pick it. It was however used by herbalists (its Irish name is *lus* meaning herb) as a treatment for different ailments very dangerously. A poultice to reduce swelling, an ointment in treating of open sores and taken boiled in wine as an expectorant. In Dublin, in the 19th Century, the leaves were dried and used as snuff by old women and in Cork the soft leaves at the centre of the plant were used for healing cuts.

In southern England it has been cultivated for the pharmaceutical industry. In 1785 the botanist, William Withering, proved that foxgloves were effective against dropsy. In "An Account of the Foxglove and some of its Medical Uses" he described the symptoms of digitalis, the toxin derived from the foxglove in detail. It increases speed, force and pace of cardiac contractions and it is widely employed in the treatment of various heart conditions.

Another Irish name for it is *lus na mban sí*, the herb of the banshee, which equates to the English name, foxglove. The first part fox having nothing to do with the beautiful mammal but a corruption from folk, meaning the little people or fairies and the second part, glove, is the Anglo Saxon word, *Gliew*, a musical instrument consisting of many bells.

