

Common Name: **Aconite**

Genus: *Aconitum*

Species: *napellus*

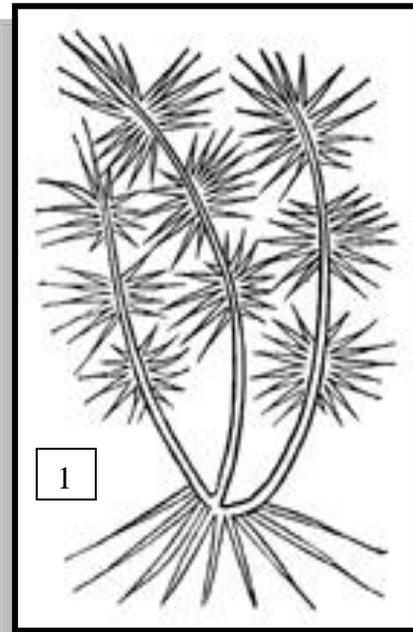
Family: Ranunculaceae

AKA: Monkshood, Blue Rocket, Friar's Cap, Auld Wife's Huid, Wolf's Bane



Historical Uses:

Medicinal: “As *Theoph*, in plaine words doth testifie concerning his owne Aconite; for which he saith that there was never found his Antidote or remedie: whereof *Atheneus & Thopompus* write, that this plant is the most poisonous herb of all others, which moved *Ouid* to say *Quequianascuntur dura vivacia caute*: notwithstanding it is not without his peculiar virtues. *Ioachimus Camerarius* now living in Noremberg saith, the water dropped into the eies ceaseth the pain and burning: it is reported to prevail mightily against the biting's of scorpions and is of such force, that if the scorpion passe by where it groweth and touch the same, presently he becometh dull, heavy, and senceless, and if the same scorpion by chance touched the white hellebore, he is presently delivered from his drowsiness.”(1-Winter Wolfes-bane)



The force and facultie of Wolfes Bane is deadly to man and all kindes of beasts: the same was tried of late in Antwerpe, and is as yet fresh in memorie, by and evident experiment, but most lamentable; for when the leaves hereof were by certaine ignorant persons served up in sallads, all that did eate thereof were presently taken with most cruell symptomes, and so died.

The symptoms that follow those that do eate of these deadly herbs are these; their lips and tongues swell forth with, their eyes hang out, their thighes are stiffe, and their breaths are taken from them, as **Auicen** writeth in his fourth booke. The force of this poyson is such, that if the points of darts or arrows be touched with the same, it bringeth deadly hurt to those that are wounded therewith.

Against so deadly a poyson **Auicen** reckoneth up certaine remedies, which helpe after the poyson is vomited up; and among the these he maketh mention of the Mouse (as the Copics every where have it) nourished and fed up with *napellus*, which is altogether an enemy to the poysonsome nature thereof, and delivereth him that hath taken it from all perill and danger.

Antonius Guancris of Pauia, a famous to physician in his age, in his treaty of poysons is of opinion, that it is not a mouse that **Auicen** speaks of, but a fly: for he telleth

of a certaine Philosopher that did very carefully and diligently make search after this Mouse, and neither could find at any time either Mouse, or the root of Wolfsbane gnawne or bitten, as he had read; but in searching he found many flies feeding on the leaves, which the same Philosopher tooke, and made them an Antidote or counterpoyson, which he found to be good and the effectuall against other poysons, but especially the poyson of Wolfs-bane.”(Note: the image that Gerard shows on page 969 is what we today refer to as *Aconitum napellus*, however, this plant is listed as Wholesome Wolfes Bane and is listed as a remedy to poison). (1-Mithridate Woolfes-bane)



Close-up of flower showing hood like form

Ornamental: “Because it is ornamental and has a light blue color, *A. napellus* became a garden flower. But a banquet in the sixteenth century, made people aware of the plants deadly qualities. Many of the diners died from eating a salad into which aconite leaves had been ignorantly added.”(2)

Household: “The root was used as a poison for killing pests. To get rid of rats, The Goodman of Paris advises: “make cakes of paste and toasted cheese and powdered aconite and set these near to their holes where the rats have naught to drink.” (3)



“Acontitum alterum, which some do call Cynoctonon, some Lycopctonon, grows plentifully in Italy on hills called Vestini, differing from that before it. But it hath leaves like to those of ye plain tree, but more jagged and a great deal less, and blacker, but a stock, as the stem of fern, bare, yet height of a cubit, or more; and ye seeds in cods in a manner somewhat long, ye roots like ye Cirri of Squills, black, which they use for the hunting by wolves, putting them into raw flesh, for being eaten by the wolves, they kill them.” (4)

Folklore/Astrology: “This herbe is counted to be very dangerous and deadly, hot and drie in the fourth degree.” (5)

“Its poison was said to have come from the foaming saliva tossed about by Cerberus, when Hercules dragged him out of Hades. In the language of the flowers it delivers somewhat contradictory messages, for it represents chivalry, misanthropy, and warns that a deadly foe is near. Witches used it in their potions to induce a trance. Poets used the name to denote all poisonous plants.” (6)

“Some species of Aconite were well known to the ancients as deadly poisons. It was said to be the invention of Hecate from the foam of Cerberus, and it was a species of Aconite that entered into the poison which the old men of the island of Ceos were condemned to drink when they became infirm and no longer of use to the State. Aconite is also supposed to have been the poison that formed the cup which Medea prepared for Theseus.” (7)

Other: “Animal poison (including Homo sapiens), juices used to make poisoned darts, spears, and arrows” (8)

Symptoms of Poisoning & Antidotes: “The symptoms of poisoning are tingling and numbness of tongue and mouth and a sensation of ants crawling over the body, nausea and vomiting with epigastric pain, labored breathing, pulse irregular and weak, skin cold and clammy, features bloodless, giddiness, staggering, mind remains clear.” (9)

“The symptoms that follow those that do eat the these deadly herbes are these; their lips and tongues swell forthwith, their eyes hangout, their thighs are stiff, and their wits are taketh from them, as Auicen writeth in his fourth book. The force of this poison is such, that if the points of darts or arrows be touched with the same, it bringeth deadly hurt to those that are wounded.” (10)



A side view of the flower showing the hood-like structure which gives the plant its name.

“*Mattioli*, physician to *Emperor Maximillioan II*, experimented with it on condemned criminals in a search for an efficient means of execution. As little as a tenth of an ounce can be fatal, causing difficult breathing, heart problems, pain, and death within ten minutes to four hours, depending on how much is ingested. In modern use (1500’s) it forms an analgesic and sedative for use in neuralgia, migraine, fever, gout, and the pains of arthritis and rheumatism.” (11)

Contemporary Uses:

Parts Used: Roots

Medicinal: “A sedative, painkilling herb that acts on the heart and central nervous system, and also lowers fever.” “Internally for facial neuralgia and to relieve the pain of arthritis and gout. Externally for sciatica and arthritis. Used in homeopathy for shock, chickenpox, measles, mumps, croup, toothache and teething, and complaints caused, or made worse, by getting chilled.” (12)

Cautions: “All parts of aconitums are highly toxic if eaten and may cause systemic poisoning if handled” (13)

Area of Origin: North and Central Europe

Physical description: Tuberos perennial with upright stems and mid-green leaves

Plant type: Perennial

Height: 4-5’

Flower color: Deep blue, hooded

Flowering period: Late summer

Soil type/requirements: Deep, moisture-retentive soil

Hardiness zone: USDA 5-8

Sun requirements: Shade

Propagation: By division when dormant; by seed sown in spring

Cautions: “For use by qualified practitioners only.” (14)

Sources

1. Gerard p. 967-969
2. Anderson, p. 14
3. Freeman, p. 35
4. Dioscorides, book 4, plant 78
5. Gerard, p. 975
6. Anderson p. 14
7. Grieve, p. 6-11
8. Anderson p. 14
9. Grieve p. 9
10. Gerard p. 975
11. Anderson p. 14
12. Bown, p. 100-101
13. Ibid
14. Ibid

Illustrations/Images:

1. Arndes Herbal 1492**
2. <http://www.paghat.com/monkshoodnapellus.html>

3. http://www.survivalworld.com/plants/Plants%20Photo%20Pages/north-american-plant-photo-pages/monkshood_photo_page.html#.V-B0l_krLcs
4. <http://indianapublicmedia.org/focusonflowers/aconitum-species/>

** This image is also used for Turpentine in Arndes. A similar image appears for Monkshood in Meydenbach (1491) and again in Meydenbach for Turpentine.