

FOXGLOVE



By Philip Jägenstedt

Scientific name

Digitalis sp.

Common names

Foxglove, Dead Men's Bells, Dog's Finger, Fairy Gloves, Ladies' Glove, Witches' Gloves, Fairy Thimbles

Where found

Native to Europe, Asia and Africa

Therapeutic ingredient

Digoxin/Digitalin

Used to treat

Heart conditions

It can raise the dead and kill the living.

Folk saying

Plants of the genus *Digitalis* contain a drug that has a powerful effect on the heart. This drug, when extracted from the plant, is known as Digoxin (Digitalin) and is used to treat heart conditions such as congestive heart failure. Digoxin enables the heart to beat more slowly, powerfully, and regularly; at the same time it acts as a diuretic, i.e. it stimulates the production of urine to lower the volume of the blood and hence lessen the load on the heart.

Ironically the plant is highly toxic, and even the ingestion of small amounts can be fatal, hence the folk saying.

In medical history, foxglove is best known as the discovery of William Withering, an 18th century English country doctor. Curious about the use of the plant by a local herbalist, he explored its potential medical use. His work led to the production of the heart medication we know today.

A century after Withering several European scientists discovered the active ingredients in the plant, known as Digoxin or Digitalin. This is still extracted from the plant today because making it synthetically is quite expensive and difficult. However, it is becoming less frequently used due to the potential for negative side effects.

In South America the powdered leaves of the foxglove plant are also used to relieve asthma, as sedatives, and as diuretics. In India an ointment that contains digitalis is used to treat wounds and burns.