



## Plants & Medicine

The people's choice

**Foxglove**

*Digitalis purpurea*

### Why it was chosen

The foxglove was used in folk medicine as a cure for all kinds of ailments, however, some of the chemicals in foxglove are poisonous so its use was often fatal.

An 18<sup>th</sup> century Scottish physician, William Withering, discovered that foxglove contained a chemical that had a powerful effect on the heart. This active ingredient (digitalin) is still used in modern medicine to control heart rate.

### What it is

The foxglove is a tall herb that produces 20–80 tubular, pinkish-purple flowers on a long spike, called a raceme. It belongs to the *Scrophulariaceae* family and is related to toadflax and mullein. The word '*digitalis*' is from the Latin for 'finger of a glove' and refers to the shape of the flowers.

### Where it grows

The foxglove is widespread throughout Britain, and is also found in Western and Southern Europe. It thrives on acidic soils in diverse habitats, including woodland, hedge banks and rocky slopes. Foxgloves spread by seeds which they produce in large numbers.

### Did you know?

Opinion is divided on the origin of the common name 'foxglove'. It may be because the tubular flowers are suggestive of the gloves of a fox. But it is also known by other interesting names: witches' gloves, dead men's bells and bloody fingers are just a few!

### What the scientists say

Therapeutic compounds, such as digitalin, have been extracted from plants for centuries.

Scientists are working to see if plants can be used as valuable living factories to economically produce all sorts of other novel compounds useful to medicine. Examples already include the treatment of tooth decay and the production of edible vaccines for farm animals.