

Monkshood

Aconitum, wolf's bane, Friar's Cap, leopard's bane

One of the first perennials grown as a garden ornamental were the monkshood. Hundreds of years later they still remain popular and now are available in white, pale blue, pink & yellow as well as the standard blue species.

Aconitum, commonly called monkshood, wolf's bane, Friar's Cap, leopard's bane or blue rocket, is a genus of over 250 species of flowering plants belonging to the Ranunculaceae, Buttercup family. Most are tall, long lived perennials native to moist mountainous regions of the Northern Hemisphere, although only a handful are commonly grown as ornamentals. Plants generally produce a stout, unbranched stem arising 3-4 ft. tall with dark green leaves having a spiral arrangement and crowned by large blue, purple, white, yellow or pink flowers. They are distinguishable by having one of the five sepals (the posterior one) in the form of a cylindrical helmet, hence the English name, monkshood. The blooming season is mid to late summer and into fall.

As a garden plant they are usually grown primarily in the back of the border. They may be grown in full sun or part shade and are often wind resistant. Soil should be moist but well drained. Soil ph does not seem to matter and they are hardy to zone 3. They are easily propagated by division of the root or by seeds. Aconitum is a food plant of the caterpillar of several moths and is the primary food source for the Old World Bumblebee.

While monkshood is a beautiful ornamental that is long lived, easy care, showy and tough as nails it is extremely poisonous and must be dealt with carefully. All parts of monkshood, especially the roots, are full of an alkaloid called aconitine. Aconitine first stimulates and later paralyzes the nerves of pain, touch, and temperature if applied to any mucous membrane. Even abraded skin can absorb a dangerous dose of the compound and merely tasting some of the plant can prove fatal. Native peoples have taken advantage of this poison for millennium. Juice of the roots were commonly utilized to poison arrow tips used for hunting and warfare. The other common name, wolf bane, may refer to the mythological claim that the plant could be used to repel werewolves. In the Middle Ages witches were associated with monkshood. Since it numbs the senses and gives the sensation of flying, they are said to have smeared it on their bodies and broomsticks. Shakespeare's Romeo killed himself with a cup of the drug aconite made from monkshood. In Chinese and homeopathic medicine it is used as a narcotic and as a topical anesthetic ointment but is too powerful for the home gardener to use.

Monkshood are certainly not a boring plant. So the moral of the story; practice extreme caution when handling the plant, wearing gloves and avoiding ingestion, and if small children are part of the equation you should probably avoid growing monkshood.