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Wildflowers ~ Brenan Simpson

Very few people today know the name of Leonhart Fuchs, a sixteenth century German physician and botanist, although he is commemorated by a plant recognized by almost every gardener, the Fuchsia. The reason he's mentioned here is because he was responsible for giving the botanic name to one of the more common of our local wild flowers, the Foxglove.

The German common name for this plant is the 'fingerhut', meaning 'thimble', which is a fair enough description of each of the little flowers. The latin for something which refers to a finger is 'Digitalis' and this is the name which Fuchs gave to the plant and the one which is in use worldwide over four hundred years later.

The English were, perhaps, a trifle more imaginative in the common names which they gave to this same plant, which ranged from 'fairies petticoats' to 'foxes gloves'. The second of these is obviously the older name, for the word petticoat did not enter the English language until after the Norman conquest in 1066, yet about a hundred years before that, an Anglo-Saxon named Bald, who was friend of King Alfred (the one who burned the cakes) ordered a scribe called Cild to write a book about medical treatment, which was titled 'The Leech Book of Bald'. In it, the plant which we are talking about was referred to as the 'foxes glofa'.

The ancient Greeks knew the foxglove as 'Apollonaris', their legends claiming that it had been a gift from the god Apollo to his son, Aesculapius, the god of medicine. Despite this context, however, there is no evidence that either the Greeks or the Romans ever discovered any medicinal uses for it and even as late as 1597, the English herbalist John Gerard wrote 'They are of no use, neither have they any place amongst medicines, according to the antients' It was not until about two hundred years after Gerard wrote his Herbal that a Dr. William Withering, who was investigating herbal cures, came across the use of foxglove tea by certain ladies in Shropshire as a remedy for dropsy, which may be a symptom of heart disease. From then on, digitalis joined the growing list of effective medicinal

plants and its chemical constituents are still used to assist patients suffering from congestive heart failure.

Our local foxglove is the *Digitalis purpurea*, the second word being the latin for purple. Of course, the flowers are not always purple, pink and white being almost as common here on the Islands. It is very easy to recognize. It is a tall plant, anywhere from three to six feet in height, rising from a rosette of large, downy leaves. The flowers, which are tubular in shape and spotted inside the lower lip, cluster up the spike of the stem, generally on the side which receives the most light.

Like many of the plants on these Islands, where shortage of summer rains results in a lack of moisture in the soil, foxgloves are often seen near roadsides, where the ditches collect whatever dampness is available and the clearing of trees to create the roadway allows for a period of sunshine to fall on the growing plants. The foxglove is biennial, that is to say that its seed germinates one year, but the plant does not flower until the second year of its life. Several hybridized varieties are now obtainable from seed companies and it has become one of the more popular of the tall garden flowers.

Anyone tempted to experiment with this poisonous plant should remember the words of Nicholas Culpepper, another English herbalist. 'It is best not to meddle with it, lest the cure should end in the churchyard.'

Brenan's wildflower articles are also published as a book *Flowers at My Feet: West Wildflowers in Legend, Literature and Lore.* ✍



Photos: Brenan Simpson

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