

Wild Side

Foxglove

By LYNETTE RAE MCADAMS
FOR COAST WEEKEND

Equally at home in the forest or the garden, the common foxglove is a local favorite, dotting woodland paths with the welcome textures of late spring, and adding color and height to landscape designs.

Given its ubiquity throughout the Columbia-Pacific region, it's easy to assume the plant is indigenous, but in fact, *Digitalis purpurea* is native only to western Europe and parts of central Asia.

Considered a biennial, the first year of the plant's

life produces a rosette of velvety, dark green leaves growing close to the ground. In the second (and final) year of life, a tall, slender spike also emerges, crowned with a profusion of freckled, tubular blooms that range in color from bright purple to the palest pink.

Prolific self-seeders, one foxglove produces more than two million seeds in its short lifetime; the plant you see returning in the same spot every year is actually the product of multiple generations.

In the language of science, the foxglove's name translates literally

as "measuring a finger's breadth," which makes perfect sense, given the blossom's natural, thimble-like fit on human phalanges. Its common calling, derived from Old English and originally "foxes golfa," is believed to come from folklore claiming that a fox sheathed its paws with the magic flowers to aid with nocturnal raids.

Another possibility: The name evolved over time from the earlier "folks' glove," which speaks to the ancient belief that fairy folk used the cheerful blossoms to make their homes.

Historically, all parts of the plant, in its every state, were known to be fatally poisonous, and no documentation of its use to humans existed before 1785, when an extract from the plant was found to contain cardiac glycosides — organic compounds that affect the rhythm of the

heart. More than 200 years later, *Digitalis* is still a key ingredient in the manufacture of the predominant medication used to treat congestive heart failure and certain arrhythmias.

Despite its modern therapeutic use, the plant has its detractors: Accidental pharmaceutical overdoses have occurred, as well as multiple suicides, and — in at least 10 documented court cases — improper use of the plant returned convictions of homicide.

Through the years, *D. purpurea* has featured prominently in mainstream fiction of the murderous variety. In Agatha Christie's 1938 novel, "Appointment with Death," it debuted as a poison of choice, and resurfaced again to fresh acclaim in 1993 during the first season of the popular FBI-conspiracy series "The X-Files."



PHOTO BY LYNETTE RAE MCADAMS

Digitalis purpurea, the common foxglove, is a welcome sight throughout the Columbia-Pacific region. Arriving in late spring and lasting into early summer, this highly toxic beauty can be seen along open roads and pathways, and circling the edges of forests and wetlands.



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