

Monkshood—A Deadly Beauty

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Many Newfoundland gardeners are familiar with *Aconitum*, commonly called monkshood or wolfs bane. Most varieties are tall, long-lived perennials, primarily native to moist, mountainous regions of the Northern Hemisphere. There are about 250 species, although only a handful are commonly grown as ornamentals. The plants generally produce a stout, un-branched stem arising 1 - 2m. Their leaves are mostly smooth, deep green, somewhat glossy, palmate in outline with multiple, deeply divided lobes. The flowers are produced as a terminal raceme of blue or white (more rarely yellow or pinkish). The 5 'petals' are actually modified sepals that look petaloid. The uppermost sepal is further modified to form a hood-like structure commonly called the helmet or hood. The true petals are reduced to form 2 tube-like nectaries concealed within the helmet and several scale-like projections around the stamens. The blooming season is mid-late summer and into fall.

As garden plants, they are used primarily in the back of the border. They may be grown in full sun or part shade. If they are exposed to enough sun, they are often quite wind-resistant and do not require staking. In shadier sites, staking may be required. The soil should be evenly moist but well-drained, however the soil pH does not seem to matter as they grow equally well in acidic or alkaline soil. The plants arise from a thick, tapering root. They generally resent transplanting and will sulk their first year but then they tend to rebound vigorously. Because of this, it is best to transplant them in fall, rather than spring.

Monkshood, in particular, *Aconitum*

napellus, have been popular cottage garden plants for hundreds of years and are certainly one of the earliest garden ornamentals to follow the European settlers to North America. Hardiness is not a problem as many will survive zone 3.



Aconitum napellus - the old-fashioned monkshood

So, here we have a garden ornamental that is long-lived, easy to care, showy and tough as nails. Sounds perfect! Well, perhaps too perfect. Unfortunately, monkshood has a more sinister side, in fact, it is downright deadly! All parts of *Aconitum*, 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 has proven to be fatal. Native peoples have taken advantage of this poison for millennium. Juice from the roots was commonly utilized to poison arrow tips used for hunting and warfare. The other common name, wolfs bane, may refer to the mythological connection of this plant to werewolves. Some mythologies claim the plant could be used to repeal werewolves, while others claim it actually leads to lycanthropy!

Aconitum certainly is not a boring plant! So the moral of the story; practice extreme caution when handling this plant and if small children are part of the equation, then you should probably avoid growing monkshood.

Older children and teens should be educated about the risks of the plant as accidental poisonings by ingestion of monkshood are not unknown. Close to home was the 2004 death of the young Newfoundland actor, Andre Noble, who, while visiting family in Centreville, ate monkshood and died within a few hours.

Now that you've probably been scared you out of growing them, here are the common species and cultivars in the hopes of swaying you back to the positive qualities of monkshood as a garden ornamentals. After all, monkshood are not alone in being highly toxic garden plants; goldenchain, yew and foxglove are also highly poisonous, yet popular garden plants.

As mentioned, *Aconitum napellus*, the common monkshood, is by far the most commonly cultivated species, which is not surprising as it has the widest distributional range of any species growing within Eurasia. The wild form has typical deep blue

flowers. It also comes in a white form called 'Album'. A hybrid between it and *A. variegatum*, called *X cammarum*, contains most of the named forms including 'Bicolor' (two-tone blue and white), 'Carneum' (grayish-pink), 'Bressingham Spire'



A. X cammarum 'Carneum' (left) and *A. X cammarum* 'Bicolor' (above)

(violet-blue), and 'Pink Sensation' (a true pink hybrid between *X cammarum* and *carmichaelii*). 'Bicolor' and 'Carneum' can be seen in our Heritage Garden.

Another reasonably popular species is *A. henryi*. The stems may reach 2m or more and the plant is somewhat sprawling with branched flower stems.



A. henryi 'Spark's Variety'

Additional support is recommended. 'Spark's Variety' has stiffer stems but still benefits from rambling through other tall neighbors. The species hails from central and western China and they can be seen in our perennial border. They are rated for zone 4. *Aconitum carmichaelii* is perhaps the latest species to bloom, flowering well into October. It is a great plant for extending the fall season. The cultivar 'Arendsii' has stout stems 85-120cm and makes a great cut-flower with short, dense racemes of dark violet-blue flowers. It is another species native to central and western China and is rated for zone 3.



A. volubile (left) and *Aconitum anthora* (right: photo by Daniela Longo)

If you prefer a change from the typical blue colour, the pale-yellow-flowered *A. lycoctonum* (aka *A. lamarckii*, *A. septentrionale* and *A. vulparia*), commonly called wolfsbane, is an option! The flowers are narrower than the blue-flowered species and they tend to bloom mid-summer. They can be seen in our Asian Garden. Perhaps the best selection is the cultivar 'Ivory' (sometimes called *A. septentrionale* 'Ivory') which has larger, cream-coloured flowers on stout 80-100cm stems. They are rated for zone 3. Another compact (45-75 cm) yellow species is *A. anthora*, which has a flower shape similar to the common monkshood. It is rated for zone 5. Both of the above species can be used mid-way in the border.

For a really bizarre monkshood, try to find the vine-pile species. These vary from 1 - 2m and literally twine around their neighbours. They have rather scattered flowers produced along the upper portions of the stems. The twining species include *A. delavayi* (violet-blue), *A. hemsleyanum* (violet-blue), *A. vilmorinianum* (violet-blue), *A. volubile* (light violet) and the hybrid 'Red Wine' (dark wine).