

Common Mullein – the Roadside Torch Parade

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HISTORY

Common mullein (*Verbascum thapsus* L. #³ VESTH) has an ancient relationship with man. It never has been used for food but traditionally has been respected for its mystical and medicinal powers.



According to Greek legend, the gods gave Ulysses a mullein stalk to defend himself against the wiles of Circe (4), the enchantress who turned the companions of Ulysses into swine by means of a magic drink. During the Middle Ages, mullein was imputed with the power to control demons (7); an old herbal says, "If a man beareth one twig of this wort, he will not be ter-

rified by any awe, nor will a wild beast hurt him, or any evil coming near" (4).

Perhaps the majestic appearance of the mature plant – up to 21 m (7 ft) tall, with candelabra-like flowering spikes – earned it this respect, or perhaps its use as a source of light: Greeks fashioned mullein fibers into lamp wicks or used the dried leaves, and Romans dipped the whole head of the plant into tallow and carried this natural torch in funeral possessions (7).

Mullein also is an established medicinal herb. One of its popular names "lungwort," derives from its most common use: from ancient Rome to modern Ireland, a tea made from its leaves has been used as a cure for lung diseases in both humans and livestock (4, 7). It is also a traditional treatment for diarrhea and rheumatism, and ointments for burns and earaches are still made from its leaves in the rural mountains of the Eastern United States (7). It is used as a tobacco substitute (11) and a remedy for nettle rash (9).

The Puritans brought mullein seeds to America for their medicinal herb gardens. By the late 1630s, mullein had escaped to neighboring fields and roadsides (7). As

settlers moved west and planted new gardens, patches of mullein marked every abandoned homestead.

Mullein also was brought to the United States as a useful piscicide (fish poison). Aristotle recorded this use in his *Historia Animalium* (11). Stream fishermen throughout Europe and Asia, particularly in Germany and Britain, used mullein seeds as a piscicide for centuries – even though Frederick II (1194–1250), King of Germany, outlawed fish poisoning as early as 1212 A.D. Appalachian settlers, who viewed conventional fishing as less manly than hunting, occasionally used mullein as an indirect way to supplement their diet. One old North Carolina resident had this to say about his German forefathers, who immigrated in the 1720s: "They'd heard 'bout the new land 'cross the waters 'n decided to bring thangs that'd help 'em git a start. Stinging fish was one easy way of gittin' food at first, so feltwort seeds were brung 'long" (11).

By 1818, common mullein was incorrectly described as a native species by Amos Eaton (1776–1842), an American botanist (6). By 1859, mullein's persistence outside of cultivation seemed to place it in disfavor: "There is no surer evidence of a slovenly, negligent farmer, than to see his fields over-run with Mulleins" (3).

NAME HISTORY

The Scientific classification for mullein has not changed since Carolus Linnaeus (1707–1778) presented it in his *Species Plantarum* in 1753. *Verbascum*, the name Pliny used for *V. thapsus*, was Latin for mullein itself (2), leaving little to intercept in the way of name history. The word is very likely a corruption of the Latin *barbascum* [bearded plant, derived from the Latin *barba*, or beard (12)], referring to the plant's beardlike filaments (8).

Thapsus may come from the Sicilian Isle of Thapsos, where in ancient times mullein was gathered in abundance (7). The Tunisian island Thapsus is another logical possibility (12). The name may derive from the Greek "thapsinos" (yellow) (8). The plant indeed has yellow flowers and is yellowish when dried, and Roman ladies once dyed their hair yellow with mullein flowers steeped in lye (4).

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³Letters following this symbol are a WSSA-approved computer code from Composite List of Weeds, Weed Sci. 32, Suppl. 2. Available from WSSA, 309 W. Clark St., Champaign, IL 61820.

The word "mullein" is derived from the Latin *mollis*, or 'soft,' which also gave us the words mollify, emollient, and mollusc (5). It probably reached its present meaning indirectly, as a derivative of the old English "muleyn," meaning "woolen" (7).



Older common names number in the dozens. Among them are hedge-taper, candlewick, lungwort, feltwort, hare's-beard, torches, blanketleaf; Jacob's-, Jupiter's-, or Peter's-staff (2); velvetplant, and old man's flannel (5). Inhabitants of the western United States may know it as miner's candle. These common names evoke three images of the mullein plant: the funeral (torches, tapers, and the like), the majestic, and the plain old soft and friendly.

DESCRIPTION

Common mullein is tall [to 2.4 m (8 ft)] with a strong stem and few or no branches. Leaves are smaller toward the top, giving the whole plant a tapered appearance; leaves alternate and leaf bases continue down the stem, making the stem look four-winged or angled. The entire plant is woolly with soft hairs (10).

Mullein is biennial, reproducing by seeds (10). During the first year, it produces a rosette up to 0.75 m (2.5 ft) diam; the stem follows in the succeeding growing season (6). Though mullein species are grown occasionally in flower gardens for the startling appearance of their long flowering spikes, their flowers tend to open one at a time or in small groups (7) and are short-lived (6); this insures effective pollination by bees but gives a ragged appearance during flowering. Mullein also may produce spikes in unpredictable strange, twisted forms – another detriment for dedicated gardeners.

Not all gardens need be visual, however. Mullein is

planted in gardens for the blind, where its tactile beauty serves a worthy purpose (7).

RELATED SPECIES AND DISTRIBUTION

Verbascum includes about 250 species native to Europe and Asia, especially the Mediterranean region (1). Eight of these have been naturalized in North America (6); the most widespread are common mullein and moth mullein (*V. blattaria* L. # VESBL).

Mullein is in the *Scrophulariaceae* or figwort family. Familiar related genera include *Veronica* (speedwell) and *Striga* (witchweed).

Mullein is found throughout the United States and in southern Canada, in the British Isles, and throughout Europe as far north as Norway and as far east as the Western Himalayas; it has been reported in Asia (6). However, mullein is not a serious agricultural weed, since it is controlled readily by cultivation (6). It is most commonly found as an early colonizer of abandoned fields or along field edges or roadsides (6).

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