

# MONKSHOOD

*Aconitum napellus*

By Yvonne Dinish



A few years ago, I was watching a popular television show in which the detectives were investigating a homicide by aconite poisoning. The investigators could find no evidence of the substance anywhere on the property or in the house. No one could figure out how the perpetrator came into possession of aconite since it was not a common chemical found in any retail establishment they investigated. That is, until one of the investigators had an “ah ha!” moment. He grabbed his jacket, called for his partner to follow him, as he yelled over his shoulder, “Let’s go before she destroys the evidence.” When they got to the scene of the crime, he ran straight to the flower bed beside the front door, stood over the plants, and triumphantly announced, “Ladies and Gentlemen, *Aconitum napellus*, commonly known as monkshood and the source of the aconite poisoning.” He further explained that he had noticed the plants as they entered the house the first time.

Monkshood is a beautiful purple perennial found in many home gardens, but “it is one of the most potent nerve poisons in the plant kingdom”. Nonetheless, historically, it was used medicinally as an external liniment or ointment rubbed into the skin to help reduce pain and inflammation in muscles and joints. It was also a component in a drug used to relieve the pain of neuralgia and sciatica. However, imprecise dosages led to fatalities and the drug was withdrawn from the market around the mid- 1900’s. But, it has been used deliberately as a poison for centuries - either for hunting or during warfare. The first known homicide with aconite was reported in 1881;

Aconite is a hallucinogen that produces tingling sensations in the limbs, and its most colorful historical use was as a favored witches’s herb in combination with belladonna to make their celebrated “flying ointment”. [Considering the effects of belladonna coupled with hallucinogenic aconite, I guess one could think one was flying after having rubbed this compound into one’s skin where it would soon be absorbed into the body.]

Today, one can buy monkshood at nurseries, and it is a lovely plant; but, the home gardener needs to take special care around this plant because even a small amount of its chemical compound, which is present in all parts of the plant, accidentally introduced into the body via a crack or tear in the skin can be harmful - maybe even fatal. More importantly, monkshood should never be planted in a garden where children may come into contact with it. It is still being used by licensed practitioners of Ayurveda and other herbal practitioners.



## SOURCES

1. *American Nature Guides: Herbs*, by Anna Kruger
2. *National Geographic’s Desk Reference of Nature’s Medicine*, by Steven Foster and Rebecca L. Johnson
3. *Herbs for Healthy Living*, by Dr. Ute Kunkele and Till R. Lohmeyer
4. *American Association for Clinical Chemistry website*