

December 2016 - Hughie Jones

Mullein (*Verbascum*)
species 360

Figwort family (*Scrophulariaceae*)
genera 300; species 5,800

White moth mullein, nettle leaf mullein, dark mullein, Olympic mullein and some just mullein - these are the common names of the mulleins in VanDusen Gardens. And these names get you imagining night mulleins, medicinal mulleins, sorcerer mulleins and gold medal ones too.

Mulleins are stately plants that combine architectural form with beautiful colouring. Some grow 2 metres (6 ft) or more. Each verbascum leaf can be 30 cm (1 ft) and nearly half as wide. 'Mullein' is from the Latin *mollis*, meaning soft and refers to the lovely, softly felted leaves. Vita Sackville-West wrote in 1936 that her verbascum looked as though 'a colony of tiny buff butterflies had settled all over them. She described the colourings as 'dusty, fusty, musty'.

Mulleins are short lived perennials or biennials and flourish in full sun with well drained soil. They grow best in soil that is not rich and grow well in gravelly wasteland. Mulleins are native to Eurasia but easily moved into North America, even making it to Alaska and Hawaii. The mullein that occurs throughout most of North America is *Verbascum thapsus*. You can choose the common name you like - great mullein, flannel plant or woolly mullein. Each one suits *Verbascum thapsus*.

European cultures had a variety of uses for common mullein. In the 4th century BC, yellow mullein flowers were used to dye hair. Romans dipped flowering stalks in tallow and used them as torches. In Europe a mix of mullein leaves and roots was used to treat respiratory and alimentary diseases. Greek legend has it that Ulysses, Hermes and Circe used this plant in their incantations and witchcraft.

The early settlers of North America brought over mullein seeds not only for their medicinal uses but also to sting or poison fish. Mullein seeds were crushed and put into diked areas of slow moving water. Fish breathing was severely reduced or stopped by the toxic seeds. Fish 'stings' were an easy method of food collection and often turned into community events. It is likely that other initial introductions occurred as well.

Native Americans also utilized common mullein. Dried mullein leaves were smoked to treat colds, bronchitis and asthma. The boiled roots were used to make a cough syrup and a poultice of mashed leaves used to treat wounds, sprains and headaches.

It is not surprising that the many uses of mullein helped it spread so easily across North America. Mullein was transported and cultivated by both settlers and first nations. But mullein had something else that helped it spread. And that was because of the kind of plant it is.

Mullein flourishes in poor soil and drought conditions. Its furry silver leaves protect it from heat and grazing, while its tall flower stalks gives it an advantage in pollination. Mullein easily moves

into waste areas where nothing else will grow. Also, mullein seeds are happy to wait around if they have to. They are viable for over hundred years.

The next time you are hiking in mullein country, pick two soft leaves and put them inside your shoes. Your feet will thank you, but Dr. Scholl's foot pad will have just lost a customer.



common mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*)

Plants of Southern Interior British Columbia - Parish, Coupe, Lloyd
Flowering Plant Families of the World - Heywood, Brummitt, Fulham, Seberg
<http://www.fs.fed.us/database/feis/plants/forb/vertha/all.html>
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/m/pubmed/21680322/>