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ANESTHESIOLOGY REFLECTIONS FROM THE WOOD LIBRARY-MUSEUM

Softly Treading *Digitalis's* Timeline, Foxglove Has Fingers in Botany and Medicine



Legend has it that fairies fashioned petals of the Foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*, right) into slippers to assist foxes in sneak(er)ing through the garden. Though etymologists may disagree on how foxglove came by its name, horticulturalists have long brandished the spiring stalks with vibrant flowers as biennial favorites. Ancient healers and patients appreciated the plant's deadly potential, reflected in nicknames like “Dead Men’s Bells” and “Witches’ Gloves.” Less mysteriously, in 1542, botanist Leonhart Fuchs dubbed the plant *Digitalis*, from the Latin *digitus* for “finger.” Not until the end of the nineteenth century were foxglove’s medicinal properties formally recognized, and its active components, cardiac glycosides digoxin and digitoxin, isolated. Using memorable names and attractive packaging for the blossoming consumer culture, pharmaceutical companies marketed foxglove by the early 1900s as a staple for treating “dropsy,” or heart failure. The American boxes from Parke, Davis & Co. (upper left) and Murray & Nickell (upper middle) date from the 1910s; the one from CIBA (Digifoline, lower left) from the 1930s. (Copyright © the American Society of Anesthesiologists’ Wood Library–Museum of Anesthesiology.)

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