

## **BETONY – Ancient “Ghost-buster”**

***Stachys officinalis*** (*Stachys betonica*, *Betonica officinale*)

Return to popularity of an ancient European and western Central Asian grassland perennial herb.



Photo: <https://www.greenup.on.ca/plants/stachys-officinalis/>

**Common Names:** Common Hedgenettle, Wood Betony\*, Purple Betony, Woundwort, Bishopwort, Bishop's Wort, Allheal.

\* *Wood Betony* is the name most commonly used by herbalists. However, botanically, the name *wood betony* also applies to another totally different species of plant, *Pedicularis canadensis*, a spring-blooming yellow flowered plant that is native to eastern North American woods and upper prairies. Common hedgenettle is the preferred common name for *S. officinalis*.

**Description:** *S. officinalis* is a clump forming perennial that spreads slowly by creeping stolons that root as they grow along the ground. Height of the species plant is 18-24 inches with a spread of 16-18 inches. Other varieties can range from 9-36 inches tall. In spring, The plant forms a basal clump of dark green velvety leaves with scalloped edges that reaches 9-12 inches in height. Upright flowering stems then rise to 12 inches above the basal clump, creating a spike full of vivid reddish-purple (occasionally pink or white) two-lipped tubular flowers. Bloom time typically occurs in June-August and will last for about 4 weeks.

**Native Range and Habitat:** Europe, western Central Asia, northwest Africa. It was introduced into the US and Canada, and has now naturalized in New York and Massachusetts.

**Landscape and Garden Uses:** Cottage gardens, border edges, ground cover, informal naturalized areas, rock gardens, light shade gardens.

**Other Useful Characteristics:** Deer resistant. Attracts bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds for the nectar. *Not* a host plant for any pollinators in North America.

**Varieties** include 'Alba' (white flowers), 'Dwarf White', 'Pink Cotton Candy' (patented 2010), 'Rosea', and 'Nana'. *Stachys monieri* 'Hummelo', (also called *Stachys officinalis* 'Hummelo'), was named the Perennial Plant Association's 2019 Perennial Plant of the Year. *Stachys* 'Hummelo' stands out for its densely packed blooms of rose-lavender flowers on 18"-24" spikes.

There are also other *Stachys* species that are called Betony and have a similar growth habit and appearance: *S. macracantha*, *S. maximo*, *S. minor*, *S. spathulata* (formerly *S. minima*).

**Cultivation:** Hardy in USDA zones 4-9. Easy to grow in average well drained soil. Prefers full sun, but is also good in part shade, and might prefer some light afternoon shade in hot, humid climates. Younger plants need even moisture, but well-established plants have some drought tolerance. Cutting back the flowering stalks will encourage reblooming. Can use Betony as a ground cover if planted 12-18 inches apart. If used as individual plants, then best to divide the clumps about every 3-5 years. Plants tend to be deer resistant. They have very few pests. Chicago Botanical Garden noted an occasional slug and/or snail in their test gardens.

**Propagation:** Easy to propagate, either by seed, by division or by cuttings.

### **History of the Herb *S. officinalis*:**

*"Sell your coat and buy Betony." (Old Italian Proverb)*

*"He has as many virtues as Betony." (Old Spanish Saying)*

Betony was known in ancient Egypt as a magical herb, bestowing protection from harm. Likewise, in the middle ages, betony was used as an amulet to ward off evil spirits and under pillows to protect against nightmares. It was also cultivated in monastic gardens and in churchyards to ward off ghosts and goblins and to protect against witchcraft. *Bishopwort* can still be found growing in some old country churchyards in the UK.

Betony was also used by the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Anglo-Saxons for its medicinal properties. During Roman times (63 BC), Antonius Musa, the physician to Emperor Augustus, touted betony to be a cure for 47 different diseases. By the 17th Century, a physician reported its usefulness in treatment of 30 conditions. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, dried leaves of Betony were included in Rowley's British Herb Snuff, a treatment for headaches.

The common names *woundwort* and *allheal* reflect this vast healing reputation. The list of conditions for which Betony has been touted as a treatment include: stress/nervousness/tension (sedative), headaches of various types (migraines, tension, hormonal), neuralgia, epilepsy, face pain, bronchitis/cough/asthma (expectorant), diarrhea, flatulence, heartburn, gout, bladder and kidney stones, bladder inflammation, blood circulation problems, and topically to treat open wounds.

**Medicinal Uses:** There is no current scientific evidence for efficacy of Betony as treatment for any medical condition. Of note is that the German Complete Commission E monographs (1998), which is a reference book of useful medicinal herbs available in Germany, including indications for use, doses, and side effects, did NOT list Betony at all.

There is insufficient evidence for the safety of Betony to be used medicinally.

There is no standardization set for evaluation of therapeutic chemical components contained in the Betony plant.

In spite of this, there is a resurgence of interest in *Stachys officinalis* in the herbal community, mostly for treatment of tension and nervousness, headaches, and some mild digestive disorders. There are currently 19 commercially available herbal mixtures that contain betony as one of their components.

**Culinary:** *S. officinalis* leaves have been used to make a tea that reportedly tastes similar to black tea (*Camellia sinensis*). Otherwise, there has not been much culinary use of the herb.

**Use as Dye:** Leaves of the plant can be used as a dye, giving a chartreuse color, using Alum as a mordant.

## References:

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Compiled by Jean Wizgirda, Goochland-Powhatan Master Gardener