

# *Verbascum thapsus*



**Family:** Scrophulariaceae

**Local/common names:**

Akalbir, Bantamaku  
(Joshimath); Gidar tamaku,  
Ban tamaku (Hindi),  
Common mullein, Cow's  
Lungwort

**Trade name:** Mullein

**Profile:**

This is a species native to Europe, northern Africa and Asia and introduced in America and Australia. The plant has several uses and is widely used in herbal medicinal preparations. It spreads prolifically by producing seeds but rarely becomes aggressively invasive since its seeds require open ground to germinate. It is intolerant of shade and unable to survive tilling. It also hosts many insects, some of which can be harmful to other plants. Although individuals are easy to remove by hand, populations are difficult to eliminate permanently.

**Habitat and ecology:** The plant is found at an altitudinal range of 1,500-3,500 m. It occurs in the temperate Himalayas from Kashmir to Bhutan. In the Indian Himalayas, the species occurs in Chamoli, Khyloghang, Ghumshali and Martoli in Uttarakhand region in central Himalayas. It is also known to occur in the Western Ghats and around the Nilgiris.

**Morphology:** The plant has erect, leafy stem, oblanceolate, pale yellowish-grey, yellow and pubescent leaves. The leaves alternate along the flowering stalks. The yellow flowers are arranged in a leafy spike. The floral spikes, 10-30 cm long with a short corolla tube and 5 rounded, spreading lobes. The stamens have hairy filaments and the woolly bracts are longer than the flowers. The basal leaves stalked to 30 cm and the stem remains unbranched.

**Distinguishing features:** The plant is quite distinctive with an erect, leafy stem and a slender, woolly flower-spike with pale yellowish-grey, woolly leaves.

**Life cycle:** Flowering takes place in August-September and sometimes carries on till October.

**Uses:** The plant has been used in medicine since ancient times and smoking the leaves is an old folk remedy for coughs and asthma. Traditionally, a tea prepared from its leaves and flowers are given for bronchitis and asthma. It was also prescribed for respiratory ailments. Large concentrations of mucilage make the plant a demulcent (a substance that soothes mucous membranes) and an expectorant. Oil from the flowers is used to treat earaches. It is also useful for ophthalmic disorders.

The plant has other uses too. Leaf preparations are used in cosmetics. Women sometimes rub their cheeks with the rough leaf to make them glow. The woolly leaves of this plant are stuffed in shoes to keep the feet warm in winters. It has ethno-veterinary uses and when given to animals, helps in curing dysentery and abdominal pain. It is especially recommended for coughs and related problems but also used in topical applications against a variety of skin problems. The plant is also used to make dyes and torches.

**Market rate:** Dry plants are sold at the rate of Rs.45-50/- per kg, whereas the seeds are sold at the rate of Rs.70-80/- per kg.