



Turtlehead



By Barbara Nuffer

Photos by author

As I savor an autumn day from my kayak on a still Adirondack pond, I soak up the slanting rays of the sun. Keeping me company are several painted turtles basking on the rocks and absorbing the precious warmth before they dig into the mud for their winter sleep. Joining us along the shoreline is another type of “turtle” in the form of a white flower, the turtlehead (*Chelone glabra*).

In bloom from late summer into fall, the turtlehead is a one- to three-foot tall herbaceous, perennial plant that likes having its “feet” wet. It is related to the common garden snapdragon. Four species of turtlehead live in North America; they vary in color from white to pink to purple.

Only insects with powerful wings can force their way past the hairs on the lower lip of the turtlehead’s tubular flower, causing the entire plant to sway. You may do a double-take as a large bumble bee crashes around getting in and out of the flower, giving the appearance that the flower is chewing up the bug.

The resemblance of the white turtlehead’s flowers to a turtle (known for its long life) led many Native Americans to believe the plant would prolong life. The Iroquois brewed turtlehead tea to protect them against evil spirits. Algonquins mixed the leaves with cedar bark to produce a medicinal tea. Early American colonists used small amounts of turtlehead leaves, harvested when the plant was in flower, as a tonic for the liver and gall bladder, as well as to treat depression.

The vivid pink turtlehead that you see in perennial gardens is most likely “Hot Lips” (*Chelone lyonii*). Hummingbirds enjoy feeding on this tubular flower as much as on the native turtlehead. However, deer also enjoy browsing on turtlehead flowers of any color. I use it as an indicator plant for deer activity in my moist, shady flower bed. The horticultural variety is a nice addition to the garden for its pure pink color and long-lasting flowers late in the season.

The turtlehead is the host plant for the Baltimore checkerspot butterfly. Late in the season, the Baltimore checkerspot lays its eggs on the undersides of the plant’s leaves. After the eggs hatch, the tiny larvae (caterpillars) feast on the leaves and then overwinter, half-grown. The following spring, each caterpillar matures and forms a chrysalis, emerging ten days later as a butterfly. The orange and black larvae and adult stages of the insect are brightly colored signals of their toxicity to predators; the toxicity is a result of ingesting the turtlehead plant.

As the autumn chill starts to settle around the beautiful wetlands, rivers, ponds and lakes of New York State, walk the fringes of these waterways and keep your eyes open for any “moving” flowers. You may just come across a turtlehead plant with a bee thrashing about inside!

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