

Wildflower in Focus

Text by Melanie Choukas-Bradley
Artwork by Tina Thieme Brown
Photos by Pat Durkin

White Turtlehead (Balmony)

Chelone glabra L.

Snapdragon or Figwort Family (*Scrophulariaceae*)



White turtlehead serves as the primary regional host plant for the Baltimore checkerspot butterfly (*Euphydryas phaeton*), Maryland's official state insect (see below under Wildlife Lore). This wildflower has also enjoyed a rich herbal history. White turtlehead grows throughout Maryland.

Flowers: White (often pink-tinged) or pale pink, irregular, two-lipped (the upper lip arching downward and strongly suggesting a turtle's head). Flowers about 1" long, in dense spikes. The flowers somewhat resemble cultivated snapdragon blooms.

Leaves: Opposite, simple, lanceolate, toothed. Sessile or nearly so, 2 1/2-6" long.

Height and Growth Habit: 1-3'; unbranched or branched toward the top.

Habitat and Range: Wet woods and meadows, marshes, seeps and streambanks; Newfoundland to Minnesota, south to Georgia and Alabama.

Herbal Lore: Turtlehead leaves have been used in ointments for piles, ulcers, herpes and inflamed breasts, according to Steven Foster and James A. Duke. Alma R. Hutchens reports in **Indian Herbology of North America:** "Balmony" (turtlehead) "is a bitter tonic and among the best medicine there is for improving appetite. When the stomach action is weak," she writes, "Balmony has a stimulating influence." She also writes that the plant "is regarded by some physicians as having no superior in expelling worms," adding: "When worms are present, we have found they are more prone to treatment each month at full moon." Worm sufferers beware: do not try to harvest this plant, even when the moon is full!



White Turtlehead at Clarksburg wetland



Baltimore Checkerspot butterfly ovipositing on White Turtlehead

Wildlife Lore: The Baltimore checkerspot (sometimes called simply "the Baltimore") is one of our most vividly colored butterflies, its orange, black and white pattern suggesting the crest of Lord Baltimore. However, as development has meant the disappearance of the seepage meadow the butterfly requires, it has become locally rare to uncommon. Deer have also wreaked havoc on turtlehead populations. During 2002, the Baltimore checkerspot was officially listed as a threatened species in Maryland. Butterfly conservationist Pat Durkin (founder of the Baltimore Checkerspot Restoration Project of Maryland and co-founder of the Washington Area Butterfly Club) explains the life cycle of the Baltimore checkerspot and how it is tied to the turtlehead: "The butterfly has only one brood each year, which flies for only three weeks from mid-June to early July. The females lay their eggs at this time on the turtlehead leaves. The caterpillars hatch a few days later and spin communal webs on the plant, usually embracing several leaves. When they consume those leaves, they move onto others. They eat, grow, and shed exoskeletons three times before frost. Shorter days and colder nights stimulate them to descend the plant, roll themselves into some duff beneath it, and convert the water in their bodies to an organic antifreeze so they don't freeze. Right about now" (she wrote on March 25th) "they are becoming active again, returning to the turtlehead for two more instars

before turning into chrysalids later in the spring. They emerge in June to start the cycle all over again." Pat Durkin addressed a MNPS monthly meeting about the Baltimore checkerspot and white turtlehead this past spring. The Baltimore Checkerspot Restoration Project is looking for large stands of white turtlehead (50-plus plants) as part of its ongoing conservation efforts. If you know of one in Maryland and wish to contact Pat, her email address is baltcheckerspot@aol.com.

Blooming Time: August - October.

Similar Species: Red turtlehead (*C. obliqua*) is a plant of Maryland's Coastal Plain. It has deep pink flowers and isn't known as a host plant for the Baltimore, probably because the Coastal Plain is outside of the butterfly's Piedmont and westward regional range, according to Pat. Red turtlehead is listed as G4S1 and Threatened in Maryland, according to Maryland Native Plant Society President Cris Fleming, who says it occurs at Battlecreek Cypress Swamp and other places.

Wildflower in Focus text adapted from **An Illustrated Guide to Eastern Woodland Wildflowers and Trees: 350 Plants Observed at Sugarloaf Mountain, Maryland** (Choukas-Bradley and Brown, University of Virginia Press).