



CULTIVATION NOTES

#1 | SEPTEMBER 1992 VOL. 6, No. 2

White Turtlehead

Chelone glabra L.

A Rhode Island Native Plant

Family SCROPHULARIACEAE (Figwort Family)

by Roberta Johnson

Turtlehead, snakehead, codhead, shell-flower, bitterherb, and balmomy are all old-fashioned names for this perennial herb native to bogs and stream banks.

The scientific name of this genus, *chelone*, comes from the Greek word for tortoise, so named because the shape of the flower resembles a reptile's head; Mrs. Dana notes that the flowers are "more odd and striking than pretty." The leaves were said to be tonic and were used for liver complaints and to expel worms.

The flowers are white (often tinged with pink), two-lipped and irregular, borne in compact terminal spikes. They usually open a few at a time during late summer and fall. The lanceolate, toothed leaves are opposite. White Turtlehead, *Chelone glabra* L., is found in nature in moist, acid soils from eastern Canada south to Alabama and Missouri. Pink Turtlehead, *Chelone Lyonii* Pursh, is the best species for gardens, and is native to the mountains of the southeastern United States (its cultivation requirements are similar to those of White Turtlehead). Rose Turtlehead, *Chelone obliqua* L., grows in wet, swampy woods from Maryland south and is also desirable for gardens with moist, acid soils.



CULTIVATION NOTES

Chelone glabra L. Smooth Turtlehead

Perennial. White, pink-tinged flowers in August and September. 2 to 6' tall, preferring rich, moist soils or stream edges in light shade. If planted in full sun, keep constantly moist.

Propagation from cuttings: 3 to 6" long stem tip cuttings, taken in late June or July, will form roots if inserted (including at least one node) in a bed of sand or mixed peat moss and sand, in a closed frame or clear plastic bag (to help maintain constant humidity) for 3-4 weeks (check regularly to keep a constantly moist, not soggy, condition). When rooted, set in flats of sandy loam and leaf mold or over-winter in a coldframe. Set out in place the following spring in moist ground.

Propagation from divisions: Old plants may be lifted carefully and divided in early spring or after flowering.

Propagation from seed: Turtlehead seeds should be collected around the time of first frost. They may be sown immediately in an outdoor bed, where they should be allowed to develop a good root system over the winter; in the spring they can be transplanted into desired locations.

To store seed over the winter: air-dry the seed capsules for several days after collecting, then remove the seeds from the capsules and store in a sealed container in the refrigerator. Best germination results with a moist chilling six weeks before sowing; mix the stored seed with damp vermiculite or whole-fiber peat moss in a sealed bag and return to the refrigerator until ready to sow.

Stored seed may be sown indoors in March. When the seedlings are 1" high they should be set out 3" apart in equal parts of fibrous loam, leaf mold, and well-rotted manure to which a little sand has been added. Place in a cold frame until May or June and then plant outdoors 18" apart in a moist, partially-shaded location. Plantlets should be pinched to encourage branching; it takes two years to produce blooms.

Comments: *DO NOT DIG PLANTS IN THE WILD.* Obtain plants only from your own property or where you have written permission to dig, or purchase from a reputable local source such as the Rhode Island Wild Plant Society or the New England Wild Flower Society.

My own notes:

References:

- Dana, Mrs. W. S. 1963. *How To Know the Wild Flowers*. Dover Publications Inc., NY.
Everett, T.H. (editor). 1964. *New Illustrated Encyclopedia of Gardening*. Greystone Press, NY.
Fernald, M. L. 1950. *Gray's Manual of Botany*. 8th. Ed. American Book Co., NY.
Klimas, J. E. & J. A. Cunningham. 1974. *Wildflowers of Eastern America*. Alfred A. Knopf, NY.
Phillips, H. R. 1985. *Growing and Propagating Wild Flowers*. UNC Press, Chapel Hill, NC.
Stack, F.W. 1909. *Wildflowers Every Child Should Know*. Grosset & Dunlap, NY.
Wyman, D. 1977. *Wyman's Gardening Encyclopedia*. The Macmillan Co., NY.
Illustration from Mrs. W. S. Dana's *How To Know the Wildflowers*, Dover Publications, Inc., NY.