

The Lore Of Boneset, Joe-Pye, And White Snakeroot

by R. Kelly Coffey

Spring plants get all the attention. Trillium, trout lily, may apple, lady's slipper, bloodroot, and other forest-floor plants are constantly photographed and praised for their beauty. Although these plants deserve the glory they receive, their counterparts in the meadow, maturing in late summer and fall, are often neglected. Boneset, Joe-pye-weed, white snakeroot, and other end-of-season flowers rarely grace magazine covers or draw the interest of many naturalists.

Perhaps the time of year affects our attention span. The fresh and colorful spring plants set against the bare, brown forest floor demand more than a glance, and after several months of winter drabness we are eager to see green growth. In contrast, by late summer the wet southern Appalachian climate has

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produced, for several months, massive amounts of lush foliage. Consequently, a plant maturing in August or September is hardly noticeable amid so much vegetation. Yet, many of these summer plants have interesting stories behind them and have been valued in the past for their healing properties.

A Common Remedy

Boneset (*Eupatorium perfoliatum*) is easily identified by its leaves. The species name, *perfoliatum*, means "through the leaf," a perfect descriptive name for this plant. The opposite leaves along the stem are fused together at the base as if the stem grew through the middle of a single leaf. Other common names, such as "throughstem" and "crosswort" echo this characteristic. In August, boneset is crowned by a flat cluster of tiny white flowers. The plant thrives in sunny locations, being found in pastures and abandoned fields.

Boneset's odd name originated with a folk remedy that called for incorporating the leaves in bandages for broken limbs, supposedly to aid in the healing process. The plant has a number of other medicinal properties, to such an extent



Boneset Photo: Kelly Coffey

that an early 20th century doctor declared that no other plant was used as much in medicine as boneset and its relatives.

Despite the origin of its name, boneset was more widely utilized to produce a tea as a remedy for various respiratory illnesses. My grandmother followed a procedure every August in preparation for a possible bout with the flu in the coming winter. She cut off the entire boneset plant at the ground and hung the plant to dry in her pantry. If she began to feel the symptoms of flu during the winter, she would pull off a few leaves, steep them in hot water, and drink the bitter liquid before it cooled. (She also added a small amount of whiskey, not as a medicinal ingredient, but because "it helps the taste," she said.)

King of the Meadow

Close relatives of boneset are the Joe-pye-weeds, three different species with similar characteristics. Also known as king-of-the-meadow, the Joe-pye-weeds are easily recognized as the purple-tinged plants that tower up to 10 feet high in pastures and fields. Their relationship to boneset is obvious from

the shape and appearance of the leaves. Spotted Joe-pye-weed (*Eupatorium maculatum*) is distinguished from sweet Joe-pye-weed (*Eupatorium purpureum*) by its spotted stem.

A third species, *Eupatorium fistulosum*, is called hollow Joe-pye-weed because of its tube-like stalk. Legend states that Joe Pye was a northeastern Indian who used the plants to cure various diseases. They were most widely known for their ability to relieve urinary ailments. The Cherokee found hollow Joe-pye-weed to be useful in spraying medicine on an ill person (perhaps in a ceremonial fashion), and they also utilized the stem as a straw to drink water from shallow springs.

A Venomous Plant

A third late-summer plant in the *Eupatorium* genus- white snakeroot (*Eupatorium rugosum*)- also has medicinal values if used properly. But it is infamous as the cause of a disease known as "milk sickness." If a cow grazes the plant, a toxic substance from white snakeroot is transmitted to her milk. Consequently, anyone drinking the contaminated milk becomes seriously ill.

Milk sickness was a common occurrence before the cause was discovered early in the 20th century, but the disease is unheard of today as the plant is eradicated from land pasturing dairy cattle.

White snakeroot, so-called because of the sinuous nature of its root system, grows in thick colonies along the wooded edge of fields. The clusters of small white flowers - somewhat similar to boneset blooms- are especially vivid in these shady areas; appearing in late July and lasting into the fall.

Boneset, Joe-pye-weed, and white snakeroot all belong to the genus *Eupatorium*. The name comes from an ancient Persian warrior named "Eupator," who supposedly used these plants in magical potions to bring about the defeat of Roman armies. Considering the various diseases cured (and caused) by this group of plants, the connection with magic is appropriate.

These summer species may not be as visually appealing as spring forest plants, and their names are not at all charming, but the *Eupatoriums* enhance the appearance of Appalachian meadows, giving an identity to the late summer landscape.

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