

BWSR Featured Plant

Name: White turtlehead (*Chelone glabra*)

Plant family: Figwort (*Scrophulariaceae*)

If you come upon white turtlehead, you've found not only an interesting wetland plant but also a link to Greek mythology. According to legend, after the nymph Chelone offended the gods, she was turned into a tortoise and forever made to carry her house on her back. Photos Courtesy of Susan Nelson unless noted



A native perennial found in wetlands and shorelines, white turtlehead's white- or pink-tinged flowers feature an upper lip that forms a hood over the other flower parts — like a turtle's shell. Some think the flowers bear a stronger resemblance to a fish or a snake, giving rise to the additional common names: cod head, fish mouth, snakehead and snake mouth. Hummingbirds and bees collect nectar and pollen from the flowers; several insects feed on the leaves and seeds.

Plant Stats

STATEWIDE WETLAND INDICATOR STATUS:OBL

PRIMARY USES: Pollinator benefits, rain garden and wetland plantings

Identification

An upright or sprawling herb, white turtlehead grows 2 to 3 feet tall. Its opposite, lance-shaped leaves are either sessile (with no petioles, AKA leaf stalks) or have petioles shorter than a quarter-inch long. Finely toothed and smooth, typical leaves grow 3 to 6 inches long; at least some of them are more than three-quarters of an inch wide. The smooth stems are either round or square. A terminal spike of white or pinkish flowers blooms in August and September. The flower's upper lip forms a hood, while the lobed, lower

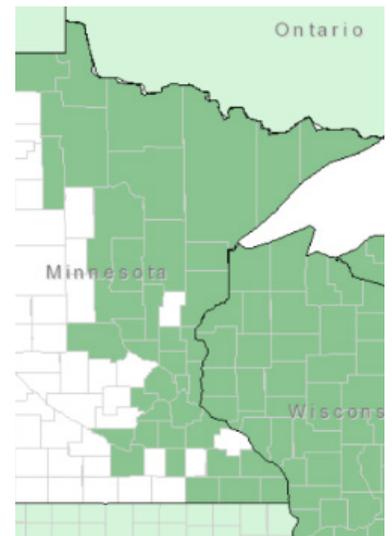


The leaves of white turtlehead are lance-shaped, sessile and smooth.

lip provides a landing place for insects.

Range

White turtlehead flourishes in wetlands and on streambanks and lakeshores in North America's eastern half. In Minnesota, the plant is documented mostly in eastern counties, although its range includes the peatlands and forests in the northwest.



Range map source: USDA NRCS Plants Database.

Planting Recommendations

Flowers open from the bottom of the spike up, growing up to 1.5 inches long with a wide, flattened mouth. Woolly hairs cover flowers' lower interior.



Because turtlehead is an obligate wetland species, it needs wet or moist soils to survive. It tolerates temporary flooding. Plants can be grown from seed, containerized plants, or division of clumps. Choose a planting with full or partial sun. The bitter leaves are unattractive to deer and other herbivores.

Uses

White turtlehead provides a late-season source of nectar and pollen for ruby-throated hummingbirds, bumblebees and long-horned bees. It's a larval host for the Baltimore checkerspot butterfly. Suitable for planting in wetlands and rain gardens, it will enhance the benefit of swales constructed for stormwater treatment.

Similar Species

Red turtlehead, *Chelone obliqua*, is considered native to Minnesota, but its range and abundance are not precisely known. It has red or pink flowers; its stalked leaves are more broadly lance-shaped than white turtlehead's. Both species require wet soils.



Left: Red turtlehead is among the species similar to white turtlehead. **Photo Credit:** R. W. Smith, courtesy of the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center Digital Library, NPIN Image ID 33695 **Right:** White turtlehead blooms.

References

- USDA Plants Database: <https://plants.usda.gov/core/profile?symbol=chgl2>
Illinois Wildflowers: https://www.illinoiswildflowers.info/wetland/plants/wh_turtlehead.htm
Wetland Plants of Minnesota, by Steve. W. Chadde. Second edition, 2012
A Dictionary of Greek and Roman biography and mythology. Sir William Smith, ed. 1867. Page 693
Pollinators of Native Plants, by Heather Holm. Pollination Press, LLC, 2014
Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center: www.wildflower.org

Developed by Susan Nelson