

Wildflower in Focus

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Boneset (Thoroughwort)

Eupatorium perfoliatum L.

Aster or Daisy Family (*Asteraceae*)



Boneset was an herbal medicine staple for Native Americans and early European settlers. Thanks to its distinctive leaves, boneset can be told readily from other indigenous white-flowering members of the *Eupatorium* genus. Boneset grows in moist and wet habitats throughout Maryland.

Flower Heads: Small chalky white disk flowers (10 - 25 per head) form fuzzy, flat-topped or multi-leveled terminal and upper axillary clusters up to several inches across.

Leaves: Opposite, simple; lanceolate, toothed, sessile, with at least some of the leaf bases so perfectly fused that the plant stalk appears to pierce through one double leaf. When leaves are fused, the term is "connate"; when appearing to be pierced by the stem -

"perfoliate". One botanical manual describes boneset's leaves as "connate-perfoliate". Plant stalk hairy.

Habitat and Range: Moist or wet woods, meadows and thickets; much of eastern U.S. and Canada.

Herbal Lore: According to Steven Foster and James Duke (*Peterson Field Guides' Field Guide to Medicinal Plants: Eastern and Central North America*), boneset was a "common home remedy of 19th-century America, extensively employed by American Indians and early settlers. Widely used, reportedly with success, during flu epidemics in 19th and early 20th century. Leaf tea once used to induce sweating in fevers, flu, and colds; also used for malaria, rheumatism, muscular pains, spasms, pneumonia, pleurisy, gout, etc. Leaves poulticed onto tumors. West German research suggests nonspecific immune system-stimulating properties, perhaps vindicating historical use in flu epidemics." However, Foster and Duke add the warning: "Emetic and laxative in large doses. May contain controversial and potentially liver-harming pyrrolizidine alkaloids." The herb is extremely bitter to the taste, and therefore disliked by children, according to Alma R. Hutchens, who reports in her book *Indian Herbalogy of North America*: "in these cases a thick syrup of Boneset, ginger and anise is used... for coughs". I report on the plant's herbal use for historical purposes only. One should never harvest this native plant!

Similar Species: Use the connate-perfoliate leaves to distinguish this species from other white-flowering *Eupatorium* locals (and add to your botanical vocabulary!).

Blooming Time: July - October.

Locations: Moist and wet areas throughout the state. Cabin John Regional Park, Potomac River and C&O Canal, Bear Branch - Sugarloaf Mountain, Little Bennett Regional Park.

"Wildflower in Focus" is adapted from **An Illustrated Guide to Eastern Woodland Wildflowers and Trees: 350 Plants Observed at Sugarloaf Mountain, Maryland** (Choukas-Bradley and Brown, paperback edition, 2008, University of Virginia Press).