

# Turtlehead

by Lyn Chimera

Turtlehead (*Chelone glabra*) is one of my favorite native plants. It has a wide native range from Newfoundland to Minnesota and south to Georgia. Turtlehead gets its name from the shape of the flower which looks like a turtle's head. The story of its name is from the Greek word *chelone* which means tortoise. (*Chelone* rhymes with "baloney.")

This native is easy to grow in zones 3-9. In nature it's often found near ponds or streams as it prefers moist loamy soil. I have seen it at Hunters Creek near the creek in a partially shaded area. However, it grows very well in normal garden soil once established. Mulching with shredded leaves will help cool the soil and retain moisture. Watering during dry periods is advised.

Turtlehead grows 2 – 3 feet tall depending on the conditions and will tolerate full sun if soil is moist. Turtlehead would do well in a rain garden. With normal garden soil it will also do nicely in part shade. In my garden it thrives in half a day of sun. The leaves are opposite and shiny adding to the beauty of the plant.

My favorite part is the flower which blooms late in the season into the fall. It blooms similar to a foxglove with numerous buds on the tip of the stem opening with the lower buds and advancing up the stem. When deadheaded you may get a smaller second bloom. In late spring it can be cut back by 1/3 (the Chelsea chop) to form a shorter bushier plant with more flowers.

Turtlehead is a favorite pollinator plant for bumblebees. Since the flower opening is so narrow the bumblebees must wiggle their way in to get to the

nectar. It is quite fun to watch and always fascinates me. Since the bumblebees are so fuzzy they are super-efficient pollinators. It's also a host plant for the Baltimore checkerspot butterfly.

Turtlehead will reseed as well as increase via rhizomes. I have not found it to be invasive although this spring some seedlings have sprouted away from the parent plant. This is probably due to the wet spring. Deer do occasionally browse them, but I have had no problems with the normal deer spray routine. Technically they are listed as not preferred by deer, but you know the deer don't read the rules.

Turtlehead is a very popular native garden plant so is easily found in nurseries. Some cultivars (nativars) have been developed so be sure to look for the species (*Chelone glabra*).



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