

Bee-Friendly Flowers Week 10: Boneset



Boneset has probably been used as a healing herb since humans started picking wildflowers and tasting them. Like its relative, Joe-Pye weed, boneset was an important medicinal plant for many Native Americans who, in turn, shared this knowledge with the early settlers. By the 1800s it was officially listed in the U.S. Pharmacopeia as a proven pharmaceutical. It lost that spot in 1900, but today it is still used for homeopathic remedies.

Boneset or *Eupatorium perfoliatum*, is in the same genus as Joe-Pye weed. The genus name is a nod to an ancient Asian ruler named Mithridates Eupator. Stories abound as to why this king's name was selected to represent the genus. One story has it that ruler discovered a *Eupatorium* species that was an antidote to poison, and he drank non-lethal doses of it to keep himself from being poisoned by his enemies. He used it like a vaccine, so it was strong medicine indeed. The species name, *perfoliatum* refers to the structure of the leaves and stem. The plant grows tall and

straight with a stem that appears to pierce or perforate through pairs of opposite whorled leaves like a barbecue skewer. It's just an illusion, as each leaf clasps all the way around the stem making it appear to have just one leaf that is pierced through by the stem along a fold instead of two.

It is the leaves, and not the fuzzy white flowers, that were the important source of folk remedies. The plants were collected in late summer and hung to dry, then the leaves were stripped and steeped in boiling water to make herbal teas or infusions. The most common use of the tea was as a *febrifuge* or fever reducer, the herbal equivalent of Tylenol. Despite its value as a feverwort, it was a dreaded medicine because the taste was bitter and nauseating. It was often served with honey to help mask the flavor.

Boneset was a staple in early American medicine chests. They used it to treat dengue fever, a debilitating disease in the South transmitted by mosquitos. Dengue was often called break-bone fever because it caused such intense pain it felt like your bones were breaking. This is the most likely origin of the common name boneset. It seems to have had less to do with setting broken bones than relieving the pain of broken bones.

No bones about it, the herb had many other medicinal uses; to relieve constipation, soothe arthritis pain, ease the respiratory distress of pneumonia, colds, and flu, and stop the pain and itch of skin rashes. Been bit by a snake? Drink boneset tea and apply the wet leaves to the bite. Tapeworm eating you? Drink some boneset tea and be rid of the horror in your digestive tract. Because it was such a cure-all, it was often called thoroughwort as it was a "thoroughly" good healing herb for whatever ailed you.

Boneset is a late summer bloomer with tiny, white flowers arranged in flat-topped clusters atop 3-6 ft. stems. Like its cousin Joe-Pye weed, this perennial is a pollinator magnet. Native bees, honeybees, butterflies, and moths are attracted to the numerous, long-lasting blooms at a time of year when they must store energy to prepare for fall.



Duke Farms Connection

Boneset is a native plant that likes its feet wet and loves sunny wet meadows. At Duke Farms you can find boneset in the Great Meadow and in the Pollinator Hoop House. Or just look in any meadow for the tall, fuzzy white flowers and follow the buzzing bees.

Want to grow boneset in your garden? Buy plants or seeds from native nurseries and **never collect them from the wild!** [The Native Plant Society of New Jersey](#) is a great resource to help you find where to buy them or to get more information.

Questions and Answers

1. Many Native Americans knew boneset as a useful medicinal plant and they shared this knowledge with European settlers. What name did many settlers call it?

Answer: Indian Sage.

2. What other medicinal plant is a close relative of boneset with an important Native American connection?

Answer: Joe-Pye weed.

3. The species name *perfoliatum* refers to the structure of the stem and leaves. What does this name describe?

Answer: The stem appears to pierce or perforate the opposite whorled leaves like a barbecue skewer.

4. The most medicinal value was in the leaves. How were they prepared?

Answer: The plants were dried, then the leaves were stripped from the plant and steeped in boiling water to make teas and infusions.

5. The most common use of the tea was a febrifuge. What does that mean?

Answer: It was used to reduce fevers.

6. Was boneset used to set broken bones?

Answer: No, it was used as a pain reliever for break-bone fever, aka dengue fever.

7. What pollinators are attracted to boneset?

Answer: Native bees, honeybees, butterflies, and moths.

8. What other ailments was boneset traditionally used for?

Answer: It was used to treat constipation, arthritis, respiratory diseases, any other ailments.

9. What other common name describes this plant as a “thoroughly” good healing herb?

Answer: Thoroughwort.

10. Where can you see boneset growing at Duke Farms?

Answer: In wet meadows like the Great Meadow and also in the Pollinator Hoop House.

Additional Resources

- [Johnson Wildflower Center](#)
- [NRCS Plants Profile](#)
- [Boneset Fact Sheet](#)
- [Traditional Use of Boneset, American Botanical Council](#)