

Turtleheads— The Genus *Chelone*

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It seems that most of the genera of plants grown in our North American gardens hail from Europe or Asia. Only a handful of ornamentals are purely North American natives with *Phlox*, *Rudbeckia* and *Echinacea* as a few examples. Another genus, perhaps not as popular as the species previously mentioned, is *Chelone*, commonly called turtlehead. In Greek mythology, *Chelone* was a nymph who made derogatory remarks about the marriage of Zeus and Hera. In retribution, she was turned into a tortoise, condemning her to eternal silence. Within the Greek language, “*chelone*” then became the word for tortoise (and hence the common name for this plant).

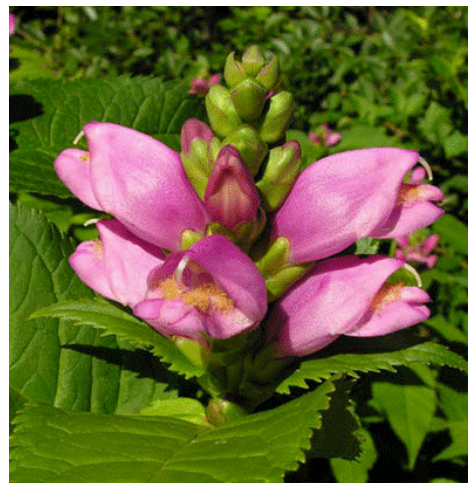
There are only 4 species within the genus *Chelone*. In the wild, they grow on the edges of streams, lakes, bogs and wet thickets throughout eastern North America. Based on their growing preferences in the wild, they prefer a moist site. To accommodate them in the garden, position them in full sun and incorporate plenty of organic material in the growing area as a means to help increase the soil moisture. They do not require wet soil, but will suffer if the soil does not remain at least evenly moist. As *Chelone* grow 60-120cm, they are ideal for the mid to back portion of a moist border or for utilizing near water features. Plants grow stiffly upright and form reasonably large clumps over time. Their paired leaves are lance-shaped with serrated margins and their flowers are terminal in a dense head, blooming in mid-late summer and often well into the fall. Blooms, which are indeed shaped like a turtlehead, come in white or pink shades and make admirable cut-flowers. Also the resulting seed heads are attractive enough to use in dried-

flower arrangements.



Chelone glabra

The most widespread species is the white turtlehead or balmony, *C. glabra*. This plant extends west as far as Manitoba and Minnesota, east to Newfoundland and south as far as Georgia and Mississippi. Rated to zone 3, it is the hardiest species. Although not as showy as the other species, this one does have fragrant flowers. There are at least 9 botanical varieties which exhibit slightly varying botanical differences. The species *C. chlorantha* and *C. montana*, sometimes found in older literature, are now classified as varieties of the white turtlehead. Flowers are typically white but may



Chelone lyonii



Chelone cuthbertii

have a green or pink flush. 'Montana' is distinctively purple-pink. Native Americans used this species as a medicinal plant to treat sores, fevers and as a gentle laxative. We have this species growing at the end of the second boardwalk along Trail 1.

Pink or red turtleheads actually encompass two very similar species, *C. lyonii* and *C. obliqua*. The former species is found in highland regions along the eastern seaboard from Maine and then south to Mississippi, while

the latter is a lowland species extending from the western Great Lakes then south to Arkansas, Mississippi and the South-eastern United States. The difference is mainly in the foliage which is narrow and elongated on *C. obliqua*, while wider and more ovate on *C. lyonii*. Both are rated hardy to zone 4. 'Hot Lips' is a popular cultivar of *C. lyonii* with shiny dark-green leaves and rose-pink flowers. We have *C. lyonii* growing in our wildlife garden.

Chelone cuthbertii has the most restricted natural range, found in mountainous areas of the Southern USA from Virginia to Georgia. The flowers are very much like the pink or red turtlehead but the leaves are sessile (attached directly to the stem rather than having a leaf stalk). This species does not appear to be commonly cultivated. Most literature rates it hardy to at least zone 5.

With their love of moist soils, turtleheads are ideal companions for rayflowers (*Ligularia*), *Astilbe*, Japanese iris (*Iris ensata*) and various sedges. They are particularly valued for their late flowers, produced in the season when many other perennials have gone to seed. Relatively new as a garden ornamental, plant breeders are only now starting to look at possible new improved forms such as 'Hot Lips'. I suspect more named varieties will arise in the near future, so keep your eyes open!