

BONESET AND ITS PAST

By Paul J. Harmon

Ask any young “Mountaineer” if they know what boneset is, and you’ll likely get a blank look. But ask that of their great-grandparents, and if they grew up on a farm in West Virginia, they’ll grimace! That’s because boneset (*Eupatorium perfoliatum*), a member of the aster family of plants, hung upside-down to dry in many mountaineer attics of the 17th and 18th centuries, and into the twentieth century. Its dried leaves were used to make a dreaded, bitter-tasting tea, that was used as a “febrifuge,” an herbal medicine to reduce fevers, according to Jack Sanders in *Hedge Maids and Fairy Candles*.

Found in wet sunny meadows and waste places, boneset blooms from July through October. It often grows with milkweed, and produces flat-topped clusters (cymes) of small white flowers. Native Americans and pioneers recognized this plant by its opposite leaves, whose bases are joined at the stem, such that the two leaves appear as one long leaf, pointed at each end, with the stem seeming to perforate the center base of what looked like one long leaf.

Our ancestors believed that since this plant had this distinctive feature, it was a sign from God that the plant could cure diseases or injuries of a bone. They placed a bunch of wet boneset leaves on a broken leg to help it knit back together. Many plants used according to this

“doctrine of signatures” were not considered truly of medicinal value by physicians of early America, but Charles Millspaugh in his book,



Boneset with viceroy butterflies

Medicinal Plants, published in 1892, reported that boneset was the most widely used medicinal herb beginning around 1800.

Besides producing the nauseating bitter fever medicine, the plant was also used “as a stimulant to promote digestion, strengthen the viscera and restore body tone.”

According to *A Guide to Medicinal Plants of Appalachia* (1969, USDA Agr. Handbook No. 400), it also was used to treat coughs, ‘consumption’ (tuberculosis), to evacuate the bowel, promote urination, ... and promote sweating! Thus it also is known by the common names feverwort, sweating plant and thoroughwort. Sanders suggests that the name *boneset* also arose from its use in the southern United States in reducing pain from a disease called dengue, or “break-bone fever,” transmitted by mosquitos, and so painful it felt like the bones were broken.

Please keep in mind that while modern research and common usage of medicinal plants is popular in the world today, it is dangerous to self-medicate using medicinal plants, since one cannot easily control concentration of medicinal properties and therefore cannot be sure of safe dosages. Still, it’s fascinating to understand our ancestors’ use of plants! It seems often that the more civilized we become, the less we know about and value plants. But our ancestors surely knew

and valued boneset, even if they hated its taste!

Paul J. Harmon is a botanist stationed in Elkins.



USDA-NRCS Plants Database. Britton, N.L. and A. Brown, 1913. *Illustrated Flora of the northern states and Canada*.

Elizabeth Byers