BONESET AND ITS PAST

FLORA

By Paul J. Harmon

sk any young "Mountaineer" if they know what boneset Lis, 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, bittertasting 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,

According to A Guide to Medicinal Plants of Appalachia (1969, USDA Agr. Handbook No. 400), it also was used to treat coughs, 'con-

Please keep in mind

cannot easily control

medicinal properties

and therefore cannot

be sure of safe dos-

ages. Still, it's fasci-

nating to understand

our ancestors' use of

plants! It seems often

that the more civilized

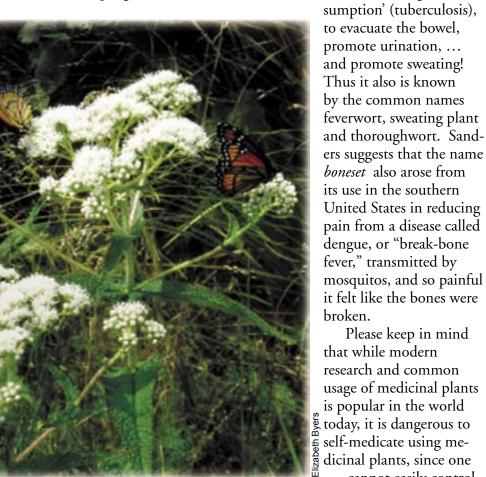
we become, the less

we know about and

value plants. But our

ancestors surely knew

concentration of



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."



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

and valued boneset, even if they hated its taste!

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