

Chelone – Tough as a Tortoise

October is a challenging time for the Gardener. Many plants are starting to decline due to the shortening days, the chilly night temperatures or perhaps from a tired Gardener who simply wishes to put the Garden to bed for the winter. For these reasons, it is important to include a diversity of plants in the Garden, including some which will perform well during these challenging autumnal conditions. One of our native plants, *Chelone* or Turtlehead is a great plant for the autumn garden. Not only does it provide floral interest, but this easy care perennial looks great until the heavy frosts of November.

Chelone is a member of the Plantaginaceae or Plantain Family and it is pronounced such that it rhymes with Baloney. Fortunately, its similarity ends there! The genus name *Chelone* was selected by Karl Linnaeus (1707-1778) and is from the Greek *Khelônê*, meaning Tortoise. The term was popular in Greek mythology since *Khelônê* was the name of a nymph that Zeus turned into a Tortoise.

The *Chelone* family consists of 4-6 species, all of which are native to North America. One of the more common species for the Garden is *Chelone lyonii*. The species is found throughout the S.E. region of North America and it honors John Lyon (1765-1814), a Scottish born botanist who initially managed the 300 acre garden of William Hamilton outside of Philadelphia and subsequently botanized the Southern Appalachians until his untimely death in Asheville, NC. In 1813, the plant was described and authored by Frederick Pursh (1774-1820), a German born botanist who befriended John Lyon at the Hamilton Garden and became manager following Lyon's departure. Lyon's



Turtlehead is hardy in Zones 3-8 and grows from 2-3' tall. The light green foliage is visually somewhat coarse with dentate margins and clothes the stems from the base to the tip. Come late August through September, the tips of the stems develop very compressed racemes of pink flowers. The flowers have an upper and lower 'lip', similar to that of a snapdragon with the anthers and stigma located in the hood or upper lip. Typically, the stigma protrudes

beyond the upper lip and remains after the petals have been shed (see image above left). The anthers are located further back within the flower – as the pollinator moves deep within the flower, the pollen from the anthers is deposited on its back, which is then transferred to the stigma of that or another flower as it travels out of the flower. The lower lip contains a tuft of yellow hairs that is visible as the flowers open – presumably these hairs catch fallen pollen that both lures and provides food for visiting insects. The flowers are 1” long and ½” wide and present a very noticeable and attractive display. When viewed from above, the flowers are triangular and, with imagination, resemble a Turtle’s Head with its



mouth open! The selection ‘Hot Lips’ (pictured above) has proven to be very popular and rightly so – not only does it sport slightly darker, rosy pink flowers, but it also sports very attractive, dark green foliage. ‘Tiny Tortuga’ is a more recent release that remains at a more diminutive height of 12-16”, although the flower size is not reduced. As is true of all the species, *Chelone lyonii* thrives in soils that are high in organic matter and remain relatively moist. In moister locations, they will perform well in full sun, otherwise a lightly shaded site is preferred. *Chelone* spreads mildly by rhizomes yielding a relatively tall groundcover over time, although it is far from invasive. Plants will also self-seed if the site is ideal!



Another great Turtle Head for the Garden is *Chelone glabra*. This species has smooth or glabrous foliage and is native to Eastern North America, including Canada. Similar in overall size and hardiness to *Chelone lyonii*, the flower racemes are typically much longer and produce attractive pink-blushed white flowers from late August into October. The size and shape of the flowers are identical to its cousin. I first saw this plant in late August lining the moist areas adjacent to a ski trail in Vermont – it was stunning!

The photograph above was taken in a roadside ditch in Warren County!

Chelone is not only an attractive, garden worthy plant, it is also an important food source for one of our pollinators, the Baltimore Checkerspot Butterfly. Chelone looks great in combination with *Amsonia*, *Clethra*, *Hosta*, *Itea* and other ironclad plants that not only appreciate moist sites, but will provide wonderful interest with little effort for the weary autumn gardener.