

Time for Turtleheads

by Susan Stager, Fairfax Master Gardener

When many other perennials have finished blooming, native perennial turtleheads peek out from their toothed foliage around late July. These pink and white flowers reach 2 to 3 feet (60 to 90 cm) in height, bloom later than most perennials and appear right when you need a fresh look for your summer garden. Their flowering period can last three to six weeks or longer.

In Greek mythology, the nymph Chelone, pronounced *kee-LO-nee*, rhyming with baloney, lived along the banks of a river. All gods, men and animals were invited to attend the wedding of the king and queen of the gods, Zeus and Hera. Chelone stayed home, and when asked why she didn't attend, she replied that she preferred her own house. In punishment, Chelone was transformed into a turtle, and Zeus made her carry her house on her back forever.

The flowers of the chelone plant resemble the heads of open-mouthed turtles. The flowers appear to be inflated. The two upper petals fuse into a hood-like structure, and the other three petals form a bearded, three-lobed lower lip. Tiny yellow hairs accent this lower lip.



photo: University of Florida Extension

Chelones are native to the eastern U.S., and partly the Midwest, from Minnesota to Virginia, and south to Mississippi and Florida. They are related to snapdragons and foxgloves, with a similar appearance of flowers borne on racemes (terminal spikes) at the top of the plant. Racemes feature a main stem, from which multiple flowers bloom on individual stalks, evenly spaced along the stem to create a symmetrical pattern. Flowers at the base of the stem bloom first, and the blooming progresses upwards to the tip of the stem. This sequential blooming is known as acropetal succession. Racemes can stand upright (foxglove) or droop downwards (English bluebell). Bleeding hearts also grow on a raceme.

here are but a few species in the genus Chelone. The most commonly cultivated varieties are the pink turtlehead (*Chelone lyonii*) and the white or blush-colored turtlehead (*Chelone glabra*). *Glabra* is from the Latin word meaning smooth, so named due to the lack of hairs or texture on the stems and leaves. *Lyonii* refers to lyonization, a breeding technique which inactivates a female X-chromosome.

Prize-winning British scientist Mary Lyon noticed a mottled coat in some mice and went on to study their genetics. Her research led to greater understanding of X-chromosome-linked diseases, in which one copy of the two female X-chromosomes is inactivated. The research helped other researchers understand X-linked diseases. Cats and dogs can have this mottled appearance also, such as "brindle" greyhounds.

Chelone lyonii is found growing wild in the southern Appalachians. *C. lyonii* 'Hot Lips' has a reddish stem and deeper pink blooms. *C. lyonii* 'Tiny Tortuga' tops out at a height of 1 1/2 to 2 feet (45 to 60 cm).

Chelone obliqua (red turtlehead, *obliqua* meaning inclined, neither perpendicular nor parallel) has pink

to nearly red flowers with a white or yellow beard.

Chelone cuthbertii tends to be a small form with pinkish-purple flowers, growing about 16 inches (40 cm) and sometimes taller, found in bogs or swamps. *C. cuthbertii* is found only in the wild, not cultivated, in small portions of the Georgia and North Carolina mountains and Coastal Virginia and North Carolina. and is listed as “threatened” in Georgia. While a perfectly lovely plant, the leaves are significantly less attractive than other species, and it cannot be found in cultivation anyway.

To tell one chelone from another, look for the single sterile stamen in each flower. If it is green-tipped, it’s *C. glabra*. The white-tipped are *C. obliqua*, rose-tipped are *C. lyonii* and purple-tipped are *C. cuthbertii*.



Chelone obliqua

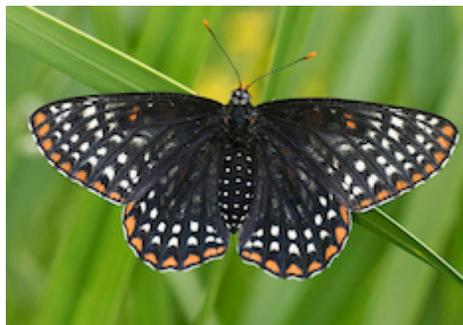
photo: Gardenia.net

In strongly shaded areas, chelones are more likely to become floppy and need some staking for support. Otherwise, staking is usually not required. The stems can be pinched early in the year to encourage a bushier plant.

Chelones require part shade and moist soil and grow slowly by rhizomes, eventually forming clumps or colonies up to 3 feet wide depending on the species or cultivar. Leave the spent foliage in place over winter and remove it in early spring. The standing foliage helps protect the plant’s crown from winter weather-related damage.

To enhance the effect of your blooming turtleheads, consider companion planting with hostas, which thrive in similar conditions and create a lush backdrop. Astilbes also have similar moisture and shade requirements, and their feathery plumes give vertical interest and color. Ferns also thrive in the same conditions, and help maintain moisture levels in the soil.

photo: University of South Florida



Baltimore checkerspot butterfly

The most common host plant for the Baltimore checkerspot butterfly is the white turtlehead. As a side benefit, white turtleheads contain chemicals called iridoid glycosides, so when checkerspots feed on this plant, they become bad-tasting to birds.

The Baltimore checkerspot, Maryland’s state insect, gets its name from the orange and black colors of the heraldic shield of George Calvert, the first Lord Baltimore. These colors appear in the flag of our Maryland neighbor.

References

- [Turtlehead Plant Profile](#), Prince William Wildflower Society
- [Chelone_ A funny name for a sweet flower](#), Piedmont Master Gardeners
- [Turtlehead \(Chelone glabra\), Plant of the Week](#), U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture
- [Turtlehead, \(Chelone spp.\)](#), University of Wisconsin-Madison Extension
- [Baltimore Checkerspot Butterfly](#), U.S. Department of Agriculture