

# White snakeroot (*Ageratina altissima*)

## DESCRIPTION:

White snakeroot is a member of the Aster family which is native throughout the eastern U.S. It prefers woodland edges and riparian areas in partial sun to light shade. It is an excellent pollinator plant, attracting a variety of bees and butterflies to its late-summer blooming white flowers which are arranged in flat-topped clusters.

All parts of white snakeroot contains the toxin trematol which can cause illness or death in livestock from eating large amounts of the plant or consuming smaller amounts over a longer period of time. The toxin can be transferred to humans by consuming milk from livestock that graze on the plant. In the early 1800's, "milk sickness" resulted in the death of thousands of European settlers, most notably, Abraham Lincoln's mother in 1818.

Most cattle tend to avoid this species, and as a result, in woodlands that have been grazed for a long time, white snakeroot can be abundant and dominant. It also responds positively to fire, and can sprout prolifically in the year or years following a prescribed burn. If left unchecked for extended periods, snake-root will spread freely by seeds and rhizomes and become a nuisance.

## IDENTIFICATION:

White snakeroot grows to 2-4" tall with somewhat variable leaf shapes. Most leaves have 3 or 5 sharply-pointed lobes, deeply toothed margins and long leaf stalks. Lower leaves have three prominent veins on upper surface. The small, tubular lavender flowers are generally hairy or fuzzy and bloom from June through August. The seeds are born in spiny burs that can be irritating if caught in clothing or, in particular, animal fur. Roots are shallow and fibrous with spreading rhizomes.

## CONTROL METHODS:

**Organic:** Control of white snakeroot may be challenging since it is often abundant and mixed in with more desirable natives. Hand pulling is most successful when the plants are as young, prior to establishment of fibrous roots systems. Rhizomes that detach from the roots when the plants are pulled can develop into new plants. For control later in the growing season, mowing or cutting the plants to the ground prior to or during flowering will weaken the plants and reduce seed production. Multiple cuttings per season may be needed per season, and care must be taken not to harm neighboring woodland plants.

**Chemical:** Careful spot-applications of glyphosate (Roundup®, etc.) or triclopyr (Garlon®, etc.) are the easiest and most effective means of control. Triclopyr is a broadleaf-specific herbicide and won't harm grasses or sedges. Be carefully not to 'overspray' and harm neighboring, desirable plants. This is best done early in the growing season while the plants are small and well-spaced apart from other plants.

A second method to try is called the 'leaf spritz' technique in which you spritz a few drops of a 15-20% solution of triclopyr in oil sprayed on only a few leaves per plant. This is an easy, effective and efficient (use of chemicals) technique, but it can be tedious for large colonies. Always read herbicide labels carefully before use. Always read herbicide labels carefully before use and always apply according to the instruction on the product label.

## NATIVE ALTERNATIVES:

Prevent the establishment of weeds by establishing a diverse mix of native plants by plugs or seed. While many of our native herbaceous plants can tolerate some sun or shade, wild geranium (*Geranium maculatum*), wild columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*), Jacob's ladder (*Polemonium reptans*), solomon's seal (*Polygonatum biflorum*), starry false solomon's seal (*Smilacina stellata*) and golden alexander (*Zizia aurea*) are all adaptable species that can be planted in various conditions.

**-3**  
**Aggressive**  
**Weed**

