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Garden thug killed mother

By Arthur O. Tucker

In the fall, my garden is full of the white flowers of our native white snakeroot (*Ageratina altissima*, formerly *Eupatorium rugosum*).

I never planted it, but the seeds blow in from the surrounding fields and woods, and it is one of my most exasperating weeds, cropping up everywhere.

Like some other gardeners, I refer to really nasty weeds as "garden thugs." Actually, outside of crabgrass (a real garden thug if there ever was one), many of my garden thugs are native species that either blow in on the wind or are spread by birds or squirrels (I suppose it's our own fault for encouraging the wildlife).

Despite my pulling and pulling (and spraying with herbicides in desperate situations), I never seem to be rid of pokeweed, wild cherries, poison ivy, Virginia creeper, wild garlic, Canadian fleabane, rough-stem goldenrod, black walnut, and wild grapes. Sometimes I think that I should just succumb to the inevitable and convert my property to a wildlife refuge, but I think my neighbors would complain!

There is even an attractive cultivar of white snakeroot with coppery leaves called "Chocolate." Considering the trouble I have with the species, I wonder if I should let this into my garden, but, on the other hand, I'll probably give it a trial to see how it behaves.

In contrast, the genus *Eupatorium* (in a broad sense) has some very attractive native spe-



Delaware State University/Susan Yost

White snakeroot killed Nancy Hanks Lincoln in 1818 when her son, Abraham, was only 9 years old.

Garden Tales

cies which are perfectly well-behaved in my garden and treasured in the borders. The large, billowy pink clumps of joe-pye-weed (*E. purpureum*) grace my perennial borders.

The perennial garden ageratum (*Conioclinium coelestinum*, formerly *Eupatorium coelestinum*) is welcome for its bouncy pale blue flowers (now this is one species I would welcome to reseed itself). Boneset (*E. perfoliatum*) was once used medicinally for external poultices and has pert white flowers above distinctive foliage.

White snakeroot was once particularly despised by dairy farmers. When cows ingest it, the milk and meat become poi-

sonous. Until the link was made, "milk sickness" (also called puking fever, sick stomach, slows, and the trembles ... you get the idea!) killed many people, including Abraham Lincoln's mother.

Nancy Hanks Lincoln, in 1818 when he was only 9 years old. Fortunately, with improved farming techniques, particularly adequate pasture, milk sickness is now relegated to the history books.

Editor's note: On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 302-857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the Herbarium, and call 302-857-6408 (Dr. Arthur Tucker) for more information about this article.