



**Common White Snakeroot**  
*(Ageratina altissima)*

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Would you believe that this innocent looking wildflower species caused the death of thousands of Americans during the late 1700's and early 1800's? As American settlers moved from the east coast into the upper southern and midwestern states, they encountered a mystery illness that caused trembling, difficulty standing, weakness, nausea, vomiting, severe abdominal pain, constipation, loss of muscle coordination, coma, and death, all within two to ten days after onset of symptoms.

Eventually, it was determined that the illness was associated with the drinking of milk and/or eating of beef from a cow (or cows) that had exhibited symptoms of “trembles,” which followed the same human symptoms to their eventual death. The often-fatal illness was eventually called “**milk sickness.**” Authorities estimated that one-half of the humans with milk sickness died. Apparently, the cow(s) had eaten something poisonous, and this was passed on through its milk or meat to humans. During those days of frontier settlement, cows were often turned out to graze on available grasses. When the grasses died during drought, cows would often graze along the edges of the woods which were lined with very common herbaceous shrub-like plants with clusters of white flowers, which bloomed during late summer and fall to the first frost. These plants were the Common White Snakeroot, *Ageratina altissima*, which is often confused with the Late Flowering Thoroughwort, *Eupatorium serotinum*. The snakeroot is distinguished by its wide, well serrated-edged leaves as compared to the thin, entire to weakly serrated, elongated leaves of the thoroughwort. Examination of the flowers also shows subtle differences.

Anna Pierce Hobbs Bixby, in 1834, identified the Common White Snakeroot as the poisonous plant that the cows were eating. She found that this plant contained a powerful, unidentified toxin. When the cows fed on this plant, their milk and meat became contaminated and caused milk sickness when consumed by humans. Tragically, this is what took the life of Abraham Lincoln’s mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln, who died in 1818 at age 34.

Fifty years after Anna’s death, James F. Couch, isolated the chemical responsible for milk sickness. The name **tremetol** was given to this toxin in reference to the tremors that it caused in farm animals and humans that consumed the poison.

Today, milk sickness has been virtually eliminated from the United States. Milk farmers are taught safe practices to control their pastures and the food (hay) of their cows. They are taught to identify and remove any snakeroot plants in the area. They know that dried snakeroot leaves and flowers are still poisonous, even in bales of hay, if fed to cattle, horses and sheep. Milk from many individual farmers is pooled and shipped in huge stainless-steel vats via 18-wheeler trucks. When received by the retail milk companies, the milk is stringently tested to meet laboratory standards for any contaminants before being packaged and sold in retail stores. Thankfully, milk sickness from commercially produced milk is presently considered an extremely rare condition in humans throughout the United States.

Common White Snakeroot is very abundant in Alabama and may be seen growing in dry and shady areas along the roadsides. The plant pictured in this article was photographed in the Homewood Forest Preserve, Homewood, AL, on October 27, 2024, by the author.

## References

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