

Gnaphalium polycephalum

[Synonyms : *Gnaphalium connoideum*, *Gnaphalium obtusifolium*]

WHITE BALSAM is an annual or biennial. Native to North America it has tiny, white or yellowish-tinged flowers.

It is also known as Balsam, Balsam weed, Blunt-leaved everlasting, Catsfoot, Chafe weed, Common everlasting, Cough weed, Cud weed, Everlasting, Feather weed, Field balsam, Fragrant everlasting, Fragrant life everlasting, Fussy gussy, Fuzzy guzzy, Golden motherwort, Indian posy, Indian potato, Ladies' tobacco, Life everlasting, Life-of-man, Moonshine, Mouse-ear everlasting, None-so-pretty, Old field balsam, Owl's crown, Poverty weed, Purple-flowered everlasting, Rabbit tobacco, Silver leaf, Sweet balsam, Sweet everlasting, Sweet life everlasting, Sweet-scented everlasting, Sweet-scented life everlasting, and White everlasting.

Polycephalum is derived from Greek *poly-* (many) and *cephalo-* (head) components meaning 'many headed'.

The flowers when dried, are dyed red and blue for use in winter arrangements.

Although there were those North American Indian tribes who used the plant medicinally some, like the Menominee, held it in awe as a sorcerer's tool. White balsam leaves were an ingredient in a compound that was burnt for its smoke and is understood to have had a strange, characteristic smell. Blown into the nostrils a haunting, troublesome spirit of a dead member of the family could be permanently deterred by these pervading fumes. On the other hand if any of the Creek Indians were haunted by ghosts they were relieved of this nightmare when they had been washed in a plant decoction.

In more recent years sweet everlasting has been smoked locally by young boys.

Records note that the Meskwaki and Menominee North American Indians blew leaf smoke into the nostrils of anyone who fainted, and the Alabama tribe used a plant decoction as a sedative ingredient given to calm nerves – and also to treat insomnia (for which older people in the Creek tribe took a plant decoction.). White balsam was used by the Cherokee as a cure for mouth ulcers and other oral problems, as well as for rheumatism and muscular cramp. They and the Montagnais tribe turned to it for treating coughs and the latter also used it for tuberculosis. Choctaw Indians prescribed a leaf and blossom decoction for easing lung pain and the Rappahannock smoked the dried stems or leaves for asthma. It was a treatment for headaches among the Menominee, used for chills by the Rappahannock and taken by the Creek and Choctaw Indians for colds. The Koasati Indians prescribed a leaf decoction to ease fever (especially in children) and the Creek tribe apart from adding leaves to mask the smell of unpleasant medicines also took a decoction of them to ease vomiting, and applied them to the throat in a poultice in the treatment of mumps.

The dried flowers have been used as a sedative pillow filling for tuberculosis sufferers.