
Wildflower Spot – September 2020

John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

JOE-PYE WEED

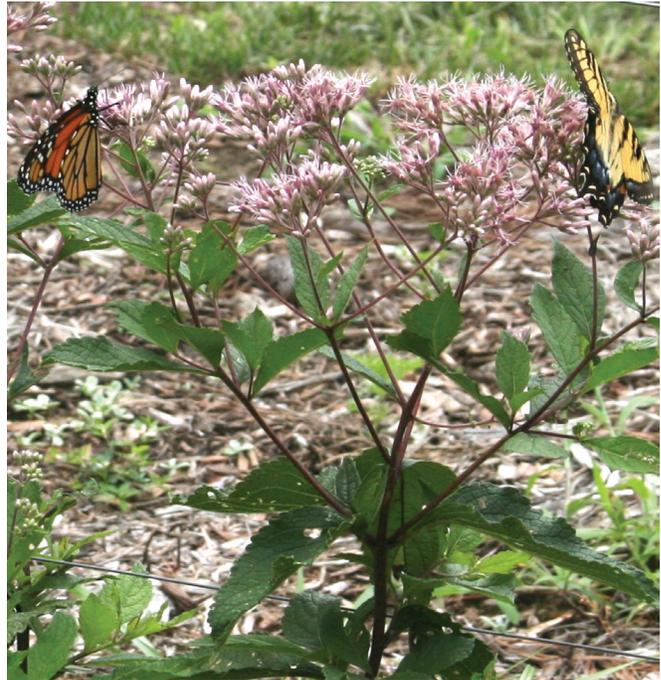
Eutrochium dubium

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

These tall, majestic plants are real butterfly magnets. Blooming in late summer until frost, they range from 3 to 10 feet tall with dense heads of fluffy pinkish flowers that are usually covered with butterflies, bees, beetles and wasps, all feeding and pollinating. When in flower, Joe-pye-weeds can be the star of the garden, but a little rough for a formal garden. Long blooming (from July-October) and deer resistant, these plants can grow very large and are great in a wild garden or placed to the rear or where a strong accent is needed.

Joe-pye-weeds are meadow plants; most require full sun, acid, rich soil and moist drainage, although some can tolerate shade, less moisture, coastal conditions and clay soil. Clump-forming, they will not form extensive drifts. Before blooming, these plants are easy to recognize by their leaves which are generally in whorls of 3-6 leaflets that are lance-shaped to oval and with teeth on the edges. At the top of each stem, clusters of tiny flowers appear in rounded groups, terminating in a large dome of blossoms, as much as 18 inches across. Members of the Aster Family, Joe-pye-weeds have no rays (petals), only disk flowers, and they are tiny, allowing small insects easy access to nectar. Also visiting these tightly packed flowers and many butterflies, including tiger swallowtails, monarchs and viceroys.

Three species of Joe-pye-weed are native to the Coastal Plain, the shortest is Coastal Joe-pye-weed, growing 5 feet tall. The leaves of this plant have 3 conspicuous veins extending from the petiole, whereas the leaves of other species have only one



main vein. A popular cultivar ‘Little Joe’ is only 3 feet tall and compact and is an excellent choice for a small butterfly garden. The flowers are mauve purple in a rounded terminal group. Also a good choice for a rain garden, Coastal Joe-pye-weed grows naturally in bogs, swamps and wet clearings, usually in acidic, poor soils.

Purple Joe-pye-weed (*E. purpureum*) grows to 7 feet tall and Hollow-stem Joe-pye-weed (*E. fistulosum*) can be over 11 feet tall. The flowers of both species are pale pink to purplish, in rounded domes, or loose clusters at the tops of stems.

“Joe-pye Weed” comes from a tale about a North American Indian called Joe Pye, who walked the streets of Boston, selling a cure for typhus, using an elixir of this plant to induce profuse sweating, thus breaking the fever (although this story is in some doubt among authors). This plant is also called Gravel root because it has the ability to remove and to a certain degree dissolve kidney stones or gravel. ❖

Photo: Joe-pye-weed (*Eutrochium dubium*) taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.