



# The Herb Society of America

## Promising Plants Profiles

### ***Borago officinalis* 'Alba'**

**Genus:** *Borago*

**Specific Epithet:** *officinalis*

**Cultivar Name:** 'Alba'

**Common Name:** white borage

**Family:** Boraginaceae

**Flower Color:** white

**Form:** annual

**Hardiness Zone:** 7

**Height:** 2-3'

**Soil:** moist but well-drained soil

**Sun:** full sun

**Uses:** ornamental, bee plant, culinary (limited)\*

**Parts Used:** primarily the flowers



"The herb borage is a well known hardy annual with beautiful sky blue flowers and succulent foliage; not so well known is its equally beautiful form with pure white flowers. It is identical in growth habit to its blue counterpart, growing to a 2-3 foot tall bush that is slightly narrower in width. Both share the same large, fuzzy oval-shaped leaves. Their wrinkly, gray-green colored leaves are best described by the Arabic name—*lisan atheur*—which aptly describes the shape and texture of the leaf as the 'tongue of the bull.'

The entire plant is completely covered with stiff white hairs. Its stems are very mucilaginous and emit a peculiar but faint scent when crushed. This white flowered form of borage is not often written about. My first introduction was at the celebrated 'white' garden at Sissinghurst in England. I procured seeds and began to grow it in my garden. Garden visitors can be converted to herbal advocates simply by offering a taste of its white flower. They are pleasantly surprised to find it has a definite but subtle cucumber aftertaste. The perfectly star-shaped flower is centered by black stamens (described as the plant's 'beauty mark' in one herbal). The flowers have the most concentrated 'cucumber' taste but the entire plant yields this taste due to an inherent aldehyde which it shares with the real cucumber plant. Although used extensively as a culinary herb, prolonged frequent use and chronic ingestion should be avoided, as it also contains toxic compounds known as pyrrolizidine alkaloids which are known to cause severe liver damage.

I find this plant grows best in full sun where it tends to have a more compact habit, but it easily tolerates a partial sun exposure. Although the flowering period is typically June to September, I find many plants extending that period.\*\* Plants complete their life cycle much faster where summers are hot. Although four nutlets are produced, two are usually viable. I find fresh seed has a high germination rate, especially if left to self seed. It is also true to seed." – Andrew Van Hevelingen, Promising Plants Presentation, 2006

\* Not GRAS (Generally Recognized as Safe). Although the species, *Borago officinalis*, has been used medicinally, especially the seed oil which is a source of gamma-linolenic acid, this use does not necessarily apply to *B. officinalis* 'Alba.' The plant may cause contact dermatitis.

\*\* in Andrew Van Hevelingen's Zone 7b, Oregon garden

**Seed Source:** Johnny's Selected Seeds - Winslow, ME

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