

Tansy, I Never Knew Thee

By John Neorr

When I first got the idea to write this article, I was going to title it “Bad Tansy, Good Tansy.”. However, once I studied up on Tansy Ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*) and Common Tansy (*Tanacetum vulgare*) and realized the title should be more like: “Bad Tansy and Not Quite as Bad Tansy.”

Every year around this time, I have noticed in local ditches and in open fields, clumps of tall plants with pretty yellow flowers growing in profusion. I gathered from overheard conversations that these flowers were either “tansy,” “tansy ragwort,” or “common tansy” and that they were either the same plant (or not) or that one was good (or not) and one was bad (or not). So basically, the only thing I knew was that they were yellow. This year I decided once and for all to determine what was what ...



Buttons are beautiful.

Two plants – both on noxious weed list

What I discovered was that there are two plants growing in King County that include “tansy” in their common name. Common names can be confusing because they are not the “official” name of a plant, thus two very different plants can have the same common name.



Petals are poison.

Nevertheless, there is general agreement in regards to tansy. The noxious weed, *Tanacetum vulgare*, a class C noxious weed in King County, is called “Common Tansy”, or sometimes simply “tansy.” *Senecio jacobaea*, a King County class B noxious weed, is called “Tansy Ragwort” or just “Ragwort.”

Unfortunately, sometimes it is also called “Tansy.”

As a class B weed in King County, Tansy Ragwort, *must* be controlled by landowners so that it does not spread. Because Common Tansy is a class C weed, King County only recommends that it be controlled, but they do not require it.

Appearance

From a distance, it is very hard (at least for me) to distinguish between Common Tansy and Tansy Ragwort. Although references state that both plants can reach 5 tall, most of the plants I observed averaged between 3-4 feet in height and the color of their flowers were identical. However, once you get up close and personal with these two weeds, they are very easy to distinguish. The key is the shape of their flowers - Common Tansy has small button-like flowers and Tansy Ragwort has small petaled flowers. Their leaves are dissimilar as well, but the difference is not that striking. Both have leaves that are deep

cut and remind me a little of yarrow. However, Tansy Ragwort's leaves are a little lighter in color than those of Common Tansy's, and Tansy Ragwort's leaves are a little fleshier.

Why Noxious?

So, why are these plants categorized as noxious weeds? Like all noxious weeds, these plants are not native to our locale. (This is not to say that all non-native plants are noxious weeds). Tansy Ragwort came in from Europe as a contaminant in ballast water and in crop seed such as Alfalfa. Common Tansy was imported from Europe as a medicinal plant and an ornamental plant. Tansy Ragwort is by far the worse plant of the two. All parts of this plant are toxic to cattle and horses. The toxins from this plant slowly build up in these animals, damaging their livers and eventually causing their death. Unfortunately, the buildup of toxins is cumulative and sometimes difficult to spot right away. The build up of toxins can take place over months and even years. Animals can ingest Tansy Ragwort from grazing, from hay, or from silage. Sheep are immune to Tansy Ragwort toxins and have been used effectively to control Ragwort via grazing. King County recommends an Integrated Pest Management (IPM) approach to controlling the spread of Ragwort. This includes pulling of weeds and the judicious use of herbicides. Mowing of Ragwort is not recommended.

Although Common Tansy has been used as a medicinal herb for centuries, there is now little evidence that it has any curative or palliative capabilities. Common Tansy was also prized for its beauty' However, while it still can add color and architecture to an individual garden, like most noxious weeds, it spreads rapidly – in this case by the expansion of short rhizomes and seeds that are spread by wind and water. Common Tansy crowds out native plants in open areas, thus decreasing food and habitat for animals. Horses and cattle will not eat Common Tansy. However, as in the case of Ragwort, sheep will eat this weed and thus can provide a means of controlling its spread. If you find Common Tansy on your property, you can best serve the environment by eradicating it.

Memory jogger

As I get older, I need more aids for remembering stuff, so here is how I now distinguish Tansy Ragwort (bad) from Common Tansy (not as bad):

- Petals are poison
- Buttons are beautiful

OK, I know it's not great, but it's the best I could come up with on such short notice. At least it may help you tell the bad from the could-be-worse!

For more information on tansy and other noxious weeds, see King County's noxious weed web page.