

Ragwort *Senecio jacobaea*

What's in a name?

The rather ragged edge to the leaves, are what gives this plant its well-known name 'Ragwort'. It also has a series of regional names which include 'yellow tops', 'mare's fart' and 'stinking willie'. Sheep are the only livestock that can eat it without affecting their health.

'Stinking willie' is the common name in Scotland as it sprang up everywhere that William, Duke of Cumberland ('the butcher'), had been when he organised and authorised the massacre after the Battle of Culloden in 1746. Apparently, the hay used as feed and bedding for the livestock was impregnated with the seed which became widespread once it was left to the wind to spread it around.



Botany & Ecology

Ragwort is generally a biennial but may exhibit perennial properties if grazed or mowed regularly through the growing season. The plant often produces three stems which can grow up to 1 meter in height and produce up to 2,500 yellow flowers. The number of seeds produced can exceed 100,000 and 80% of these will germinate. Despite being very fine and light, it appears that most seeds do not travel any great distance.

Thirty species of invertebrate use ragwort exclusively as their food source and another 22 species use ragwort as a significant part of their diet. Studies carried out for English Nature identified that another 117 species use ragwort as a nectar source whilst travelling between feeding and breeding sites. This includes solitary bees, hoverflies, moths, and butterflies such as the small copper butterfly (*Lycaena phlaeas*).

Most notably, the plant is home to the caterpillar of the endangered Cinnabar moth (*Tyria jacobaeae*). The bright yellow and black caterpillar is immune to the alkaloids which cause liver damage in most forms of livestock.

Folklore

Once crushed, the flowers produce a very pungent smell and it was believed that if scattered, it would stop vermin from entering dairies, bakeries and grain stores.

The plant has long had mystical properties particularly for those living on the Isle of Man. Here the plant is known as 'Cushag' and it is the Manx national flower. If allowed to grow along the ridges of the valleys, the plant was believed to bring joy to the heart of both man and beast. The bright yellow colour of the flower was also believed to reflect the love and energy of the fairies which lived beneath them. Whilst the plant is poisonous, Manx farmers believed that they were required to ask the fairies permission before pulling it from their land.

At the time of the great Witch Hunt in the 16th century, the plant was associated with the devil. Once it had flowered and the seeds had blown away, the bare heads were seen to represent 'old nags' or 'bald warlocks'. Those found with it growing in their garden were immediately associated with the devil and burnt to death on a pyre of blackthorn.

Folk Medicine

Whilst the plant is poisonous many early herbalists and physicians believed that "a little bit of what is poisonous will do you good". To this end, the plant was crushed and the fluid was dropped into the mouth and swallowed to alleviate a sore throat or tonsillitis. The crushed fibres were also applied to boils to bring them to a head.

During the medieval period, a mixture of crushed leaves and stems were wrapped around wounds or scalds to reduce the pain. Even up until the 18th century the same mixture of plant fibres was offered as a cure for sciatica and other pains in the joints.

Modern herbalist no longer prescribes it for internal ingestion but it is still made into a cream which is used to relieve arthritis and inflammation on the joints.



*Please note, readers should take advice from a qualified doctor or herbalist before using plants as a cure for ailments.