

Common Tansy *Tanacetum vulgare*



Have you wondered what the tall, erect plant with bright yellow button-like flowers with fern-like foliage is that you see along the roadside, waste areas, streambanks and in pastures? You are probably seeing Common tansy, *Tanacetum vulgare*, a member of the *Asteraceae* or sunflower family.

Common tansy is a Class C noxious weed in the State of Washington and is considered a noxious, invasive weed in 45 states. It carries this noxious weed distinction because it threatens the ecological health of the areas where it grows through reduction in livestock forage, wildlife habitat and species diversity.

It is sometimes mistaken for tansy ragwort, *Senecio Jacobea*, due to its common name, but is easily distinguished since tansy ragwort is non-aromatic. Tansy ragwort has ray flowers. It also does not have the sharp, toothed leaves and the long fringe of soft white hairs found on the common tansy seeds.

Common tansy is an aromatic, oily perennial that is also called garden tansy and golden buttons. Common tansy grows from 1 to 6 feet tall and reproduces mainly from seeds and less commonly from its creeping rhizomes. The often purplish-red stems grow in a cluster, giving the plant a bush appearance. The 2- to 10-inch-long leaves are alternate and deeply divided into numerous narrow, toothed segments, similar to fern leaves. The small, yellow, button shaped flowers are ¼ to ½ inch across and form many flat-topped dense clusters from summer into early fall. The seeds are yellowish-brown with short 5-toothed crowns. Common tansy emits a very strong odor when it is crushed.

This European native is another “ornamental gone wild”, having been introduced to the United States as an ornamental plant and for medicinal purposes. It was originally cultivated for its ornamental foliage and clusters of yellow, button-like flowers. It was even considered a necessary plant for Colonial American herb gardens in the 1600s. This plant has been cultivated since the ancient Greeks and is still used in some medicines today. It is listed in the *United States Pharmacopoeia* as a treatment for colds and fever.



Some medicinal uses include treatment for intestinal worms, rheumatism, fevers, and digestive problems and in smaller doses it is thought to prevent miscarriage and enhance fertility. It is interesting to note that for all its medicinal purposes, this plant contains alkaloids that are toxic to both humans and livestock if consumed in large quantities. Human consumption has been practiced for centuries with few ill effects, yet the toxic properties of the plants are cumulative and long-term consumption of large quantities has caused convulsions and even death. Hand pulling of this plant has been reported to cause illness, suggesting toxins may be absorbed through unprotected skin. Common tansy is unpalatable forage for grazing livestock and livestock poisonings are rare.



Common tansy was often used in old-fashioned recipes such as tansy cakes and puddings, which were eaten in the spring, especially at Easter time, in memory of the bitter herbs of the Jewish Passover or as a sort of tonic after the Lenten season. In Colonial America it was used for preservative purposes in packing meat and other perishable goods. Modern research was able to isolate compounds with fungicidal and antibacterial properties, which explains why this plant was used for preservation, including lining the insides of coffins.

From the Middle Ages to modern times, the oil was used as an insect repellent. Research found that distilled oil from the plant effectively repelled mosquitoes, but not as effectively as commercial preparations containing diethyltoluamide. Common tansy has been found to repel Colorado potato beetles, but further research linked the population reduction to insect avoidance because of the aromatic compounds found in the common tansy oil.

Control of common tansy infestations can be done through preventive measures. For example: limiting disturbance of weed-free lands, preventing overgrazing, and checking for seeds or plants parts on livestock, machinery or people before entering non-infested areas. There are several herbicides labeled for common tansy control. Please follow all label directions before herbicide usage, especially around water. Mowing at the bud stage of growth prevents the growth of the flowering stalks, thus limiting seed production so the plant does not have a chance to “seed all over the place”. Hand pulling also provides similar results, but gloves and other protective clothing should be worn to prevent absorption of toxins through the skin.

Perhaps now is the time to introduce you to the United States Forest Service program “SPREAD THE WORD...NOT THE WEEDS”:

- Drive only on established roads and trails away from weed infested areas.
- When using pack animals, carry only feed that is certified weed free.
- Remove weed seeds from pack animals.
- Don't pick the flowers of noxious weeds and take them home.
- Don't pick and transport wild flowers that you can't identify.
- Don't camp or drive in weed infested areas.

Weed Removal Instructions

- No Flowers or Seed Present: Pull the weed and leave it on the area
- Flowers or seed present on the weed: Pull the weed. Be careful the seed does not fall from the weed. Place the weed in a plastic bag or similar container. Dispose of the weed by burning or turn it in at a Ranger Station.

RESOURCES:

Encyclopedia.com <http://encyclopedia.com/html/t/tansy.asp>

Montana State University Extension Service <http://www.montana.edu.wwpb/ubs/mt9911.html>

USDA Forest Service—Sawtooth National Forest

<http://www.fs.fed.us/r4/sawtooth/botan/weeds/commontansy.htm>

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Plants Database

<http://plants.usda.gov/java/profile?symbol=TAVU>

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