

The Common Tansy

February 1, 2008



Common Tansy threatens to overtake our native wild plants.

If you travel east along State Route 20, a.k.a., the North Cascades Highway, you can't miss a 2- to 3-foot tall yellow-topped invader, *Tanacetum vulgare* or Common Tansy. It now grows where angelica, heuchera, asters, phlox, and treasured penstemons, back-lit and blue-purple in the morning sun, for years graced road trips over North Cascades Pass. Some gloating *Tanacetums* can already be seen climbing rock walls right by the Highway 20 itself at about milestone 128.

Common Tansy, along with its equally annoying sister, Tansy Ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*), are taking over Washington State's scenic roadsides. Both plants are unwelcome, and are on noxious weed lists all over the continental United States and Alaska.

Tanacetum vulgare is in the family *Asteraceae*, also known as *Compositae*, because flowers of plants in this family are composed of two distinct types: ray flowers (often mistaken for petals), which grow at right angles to the flower and supporting stem; and disk flowers, compact and tubular, like the "eye" of the brown-eyed Susan, which sit on top of the stem. Most composites have both ray and disk flowers. *T. vulgare*, however, has only disk flowers. But don't be fooled! One compact, button-like, flat topped yellow disk may produce as many seeds as a whole dandelion seed head!

Food and cultural uses

Evidence for intentional cultivation of Common Tansy first appears in Ancient Greece, from whence tansy must have either spread to all the rest of Europe, or else covered the Eurasian continent from the get-go. In her article, "Meet the *Tanacetum* family of herbs," published in the Fall 2007 issue of *The Herb Quarterly*, Ann McCormick writes that by the 16th century, tansy had become a staple of the British kitchen. It was used to flavor delicacies like small cakes and custards. Pre-20th century cooks liked tansy for a meat rub to discourage flies and retard spoilage. For Passover, tansy made an ideal "bitter herb" for Seder.

In the new world, settlers hardly had a chance to miss Eurasian tansy. The first Puritans brought the plant with them. Ms. McCormick writes: "Historians record that tansy was used in burying the body of Henry Dunster, a 17th century Puritan. Two centuries later, when researchers exhumed his corpse, his coffin still retained the scent of this herb."

The 19th century American writer, Sarah Orne Jewett muses, "It would be interesting to watch the growth of the gardens as life became easier and more comfortable in the colonies...Beside the fruits of the earth they could have some flowers and a sprig of sage...and tansy...that could be dried to be put among the linen...as in the old country." Ironically, 21st century England has just relegated Common Tansy to its own noxious weed list.

Medicinal use

Oil from tansy contains thujone, giving it a clean, desert-like smell, and mind-altering effects of wormwood or absinthe (not recommended). In the right concentrations, thujone is toxic, thus making tansy useful to repel insects, especially mosquitoes and fleas, from the garden. Herbalists use the thujone of tansy, in carefully measured amounts, for treatment of migraines, to expel internal parasites and to alleviate menstrual problems. However, for pregnant women, consumption of tansy, even in small amounts, is hazardous.



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Tansy: photo by Eric Brousseau

Common Tansy (*Tanacetum vulgare*) and Tansy Ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*), are taking over Washington State's scenic roadsides. Both plants are unwelcome, and are on noxious weed lists all over the continental United States and Alaska. Photo credit: Brother Alfred Brousseau @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database

What to do with it

If you are an herbalist or an adventurous cook with uses for this rakish plant, come and get it! Please don't just take just a little bit of it, but tear out the whole plant. Tear out a bunch of plants if you have time! Since tansy, like mint, produces root runners, each fragment of root capable of growing a whole new plant, you never have to worry about the plant being extirpated from the spot where you just picked it, or any other spot, for that matter. Caution: The plant can be a skin irritant. Wear gloves when removing or otherwise handling this plant.

If you have Tansy on your property (presumably you don't want it), pull and dig out as much of the plant as you can. You will have to keep at it, because of Tansy tenacity. Mowing may also help if it is done before the Tansy blooms, since enough energy might be stored in the stems to allow even cut flowers to go to seed. However, the first mowing should help rob the plant of some energy, making the next stems shorter. Hopefully Tansy won't take after Spotted Cat's Ear (*Hypochaeris radicata*) and become a mow-resistant weed.

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photo by carletongardener

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Possible biological controls

The Ministry of Agriculture of Canada lists several agents that appear to be effective for controlling Tansy Ragwort in British Columbia. Hopefully one or more of these agents may also take a fancy to Common Tansy. These biologicals are: Tansy ragwort flea beetle (*Longitarsus jacobaeae*), which cause "shothole" damage on rosette leaves; and Cinnabar moth (*Tyria jacobaeae*), a conspicuous black and red moth and its yellow and black striped caterpillar larvae, which cause local defoliation of ragwort. However, the smallest and most inconspicuous ragwort flea beetle that feeds in the root crowns causes the most damage. These have been responsible for reducing Tansy ragwort populations at many sites in British Columbia.

Observations

During the summer of 2007, informal surveys of Cascade Mountain passes in Washington revealed varying amounts of Common Tansy infestation along the roadsides. The pass most affected (overgrown with Common Tansy along roadsides) was North Cascades Highway. Next in line was Stevens Pass, State Route 2. The pass least affected was Snoqualmie Pass, Interstate 90, perhaps because Jersey barriers line large stretches of this highway.

In Washington, Common Tansy is a Class C weed, meaning it is already too widespread to take immediate action on, but counties may enforce control if locally desired. Perhaps we all need to express a desire to get rid of Common Tansy, at least in Skagit and Whatcom counties.

REFERENCES:

- "Meet the *Tanacetum* family of Herbs," Ann McCormick, *The Herb Quarterly*, Fall 2007
- Photo filename *Tansy02_photo by carletongardener.jpg* courtesy of <http://carletonpond.blogspot.com/2006/08/tansy-tanacetum-vulgare.html>

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