
SUNNYSIDE THYMES

Volume 27, Issue 8

“Helping Others Grow”

August 2018

Wicked Weeds - Ragweed

By Jean Wolph, SMG Intern

As a young bride, I remember spotting a beautiful plant in the fence row and wanting to rescue it for my garden, only to be ridiculed by my mother-in-law: “That’s RAGWEED.”

I have seen this same plant only rarely throughout my life, avoiding it religiously, of course, because of its reputation as a pesky allergen. But in researching this article, I’ve discovered that whatever she thought was ragweed was absolutely NOT.

Ragweeds are found in the tropical and subtropical regions of the Americas, especially North America. Although there are nearly 40 species worldwide, two types dominate here, the Great Ragweed and the Common Ragweed

Why is ragweed so hated, especially by those who suffer from allergies and asthma? Each plant alone produces up to one billion pollen grains! It’s estimated that 23 million Americans suffer from hayfever or seasonal rhinitis, commonly associated with ragweed, and that of those who have airborne allergies, 75% are sensitive to ragweed.

Ragweed is an annual, living only for one season. This means that control is possible - we simply need to cut or mow ragweeds before they develop seeds. Seeds have a tough coat and can remain viable in the soil for years, so we don’t want to let the plants flower. Now that I finally know what to look for - from a distance, Common Ragweed looks almost fern-like, but the Great Ragweed has rough stems with white hairs on them and mostly lobed or divided leaves - so perhaps I’ll be able to help reduce the pollen count a bit in my neck of the woods.

The Great, or Giant, Ragweed (*A. trifida*) is

also called bitterweed or horse cane. It is found as far north as Quebec and British Columbia, south to Florida and west to California. It grows 3 to 17 feet high and has three- to five-lobed leaves.

The Common Ragweed (*A. artemisiifolia*) is also known as Roman wormwood, hogweed, hog-brake, and bitterweed. It reaches about 3.5 feet and has thin, alternate or opposite, much-divided leaves. A very helpful website - “Identify That Plant”, <http://identifythatplant.com> will help you see ragweed in various stages so that you can eradicate it before it forms a seeds and proliferates.

I still don’t know what that beautiful weed was that my mother-in-law claimed was ragweed—it had a beautiful purple bloom—but my next project is to use “Identify That Plant” and find out!



Notice the difference in the leaves on a single Great Ragweed plant: lower leaves have 3 or 5 lobes (thus the *trifida* species name) while the upper leaves of a mature plant are elliptical.

Photo: Purdue University Extension

Family: Asteraceae

Scientific name: Ambrosia

Rank: Genus

Continued

→ When it reaches the reproductive phase, the Great Ragweed grows male flower spikes (at left). At first, they look fuzzy. As the flowers open (see right), they produce pollen. You'll find the female flowers attached to the stalk near the leaves and at the base of the male flower spike. The wind carries pollen to them and seeds form. Photo: Auburn University



Common ragweed (below) might look fern-like from a distance, but you're actually seeing deeply cut lobes. The male flower spikes appear, like those of the Giant Ragweed. Photo: NC State Extension.



References

<https://acaai.org/allergies/types/ragweed-allergy>

<https://www.allergychoices.com>

<http://identifythatplant.com/ragweed/>

http://www.illinoiswildflowers.info/weeds/plants/giant_ragweed.htm