ASK A MASTER GARDENER

Pretty yellow flower

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Master Gardener

Question: I have this plant with pretty yellow flowers growing in my landscape. Could you identify it for me?

Answer: First, the bad news. What you have growing on your property is called Tansy Ragwort, and it's an invasive and toxic biennial weed.

Jacobaea vulgaris is a member of the sunflower family, native to much of Europe, Asia and Siberia. It was first found in California in 1912, then recorded in Oregon in 1922.

Tansy flourishes in areas disturbed by grazing, logging, construction or fire, and can readily be found along roadsides and fence lines as well.

All parts of the plant are toxic and especially damaging to most livestock. Tansy ragwort contains alkaloids that can cause irreversible and lethal liver damage. The alkaloids even can taint honey and transfer through cow's milk to humans.

Tansy ragwort has a strong taproot whose many fleshy roots extend 1 foot deep into the soil. The plant grows to 6 feet tall – the upper part being highly branched and bearing up to 250 yellow, daisy-like flowers. It is often confused with common tansy which is not as toxic, and because of its strong odor and bitter taste, is not often consumed by livestock.

You can tell the difference by their flowers: common tansy has button-like blooms with no outer petals, while tansy ragwort has outer ray petals. The dark green leaves are deeply lobed with lower leaves forming a rosette which dies back after the flowers are well developed.

Most plants develop from seed. One plant can develop up to 200,000 seeds which can remain viable in the soil for up to 15 years. Though generally biennial, tansy ragwort can become a perennial plant if damaged by mowing, grazing or other control measures by regenerating from crown buds, root fragments and intact roots.

The good news is that there are biological insect controls for tansy ragwort that are natural enemies of this weed. The cinnabar moth, a flea beetle and seed head fly were introduced in Oregon from 1960-1971 from tansy's native homeland in Western Europe.

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You can tell the difference between tansy ragwort and common tansy by their flowers: common tansy has button-like blooms with no outer petals, while tansy ragwort has outer ray petals.

Millions of these insects were released into infested sites around the state, and by the 1980s, there was a sharp decline in tansy ragwort, and cattle deaths were reduced considerably.

When a winter drought followed by a warm, wet spring in 2005 occurred (such as we've seen in 2022), there was a resurgence of this troublesome weed in our area. The weather affected the insect agents negatively while favoring the weed. It takes several years for the biocontrol agents to recover.

Depending on the size of the tansy population, there are several management options, but any control plan must be one that is long-term to succeed.

PREVENTION

By identifying tansy when the plants are small or young, they are easier to treat manually by removing the whole plant, including the roots, as it can vegetatively reproduce.

CHEMICAL CONTROL

Contact the OSU Extension Service for approved and effective herbicide recommendations.

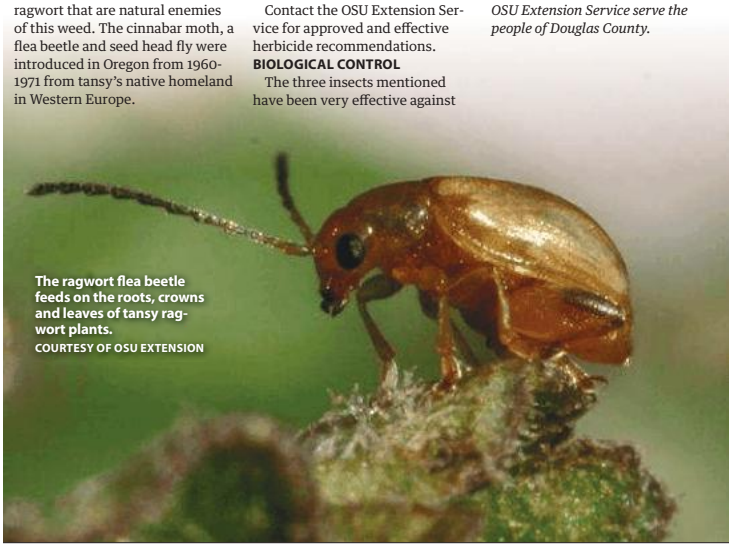
BIOLOGICAL CONTROL

The three insects mentioned have been very effective against tansy. Each of them attack different parts of the plants, so they complement each other in their effectiveness.

The ragwort flea beetle feeds on the roots, crowns, and leaves; the ragwort seed fly feeds within the seed head; and the cinnabar moth larvae eats leaves, buds and flowers.

The cinnabar moth has especially been effective and you will see more of these moths as tansy increases in density. Keep in mind biological controls are slow to establish large enough populations (5-10 years) and do not entirely eradicate tansy, but keep it at a manageable low level.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.



The ragwort flea beetle feeds on the roots, crowns and leaves of tansy ragwort plants.
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