

## Nova Scotia Noxious Weeds

### Tansy Ragwort - *Senecio jacobaea* L.

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Tansy ragwort is generally a biennial forming a rosette its first year of growth. These rosettes can range from 5-30 cm in diameter. In the second year, it produces a tall flower stem up to one meter in height. The erect stem is branched from about the middle of the stalk up to the top, and the top is often 'woolly'. If damaged or suppressed by competition, this weed may remain in the rosette stage for several years, becoming a short-lived perennial.



The leaves of tansy ragwort are deeply lobed into irregular segments. The rosette and basal leaves of the plant are stalked, while the leaves which alternate on the stem are not. It has a short tap-root and slightly spreading fibrous roots which are whitish in colour.

Numerous flowerheads form in flat-topped clusters at the top of the stems. These yellow flowers occur in late July to August. Seeds form later in autumn and have long silky hairs attached to one end. Although the seeds are windborne, they often fall close to the parent plant. The seeds are viable for many years in the soil.

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Tansy ragwort is a common weed in Great Britain. It has now spread to New Zealand and Australia, as well as Canada. It was first found in Canada in the early 1900's. Other names for this weed are common ragwort, staggerwort, and stinking willie.

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#### Life Cycle

Tansy ragwort is a biennial or short-lived perennial spreading by windborne seeds and root buds. Seed is a major factor in the rapid spread of ragwort which can annually produce up to 150,000 seeds per plant. The roots produce buds that result in many more new plants. New plants can also start from small root fragments. This makes ragwort difficult to eradicate, as you must control the roots as well as above ground growth.

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#### Habitat

Tansy ragwort prefers to grow in light, well drained soils, but can become established in heavier soils, particularly those broken up by trampling or frequent cultivation. It is most commonly found in pastures, hay fields, waste places, along roadsides and forest edges.

Tansy ragwort is fairly common from Colchester County east to Cape Breton, with infrequent occurrences in the western part of Nova Scotia.

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### **Effects**

Tansy ragwort contains compounds which are very toxic to livestock, particularly cattle and horses. It causes a group of diseases called seneciosis. The toxins impede the function of the animal's liver which will eventually degenerate, resulting in the animal's death. Many weeks or months may pass before symptoms arise because the animal may only be consuming small amounts, however, damage is being done. Symptoms of seneciosis include loss of appetite and condition, paling of the mucus membranes, and a staggering gait or walking in circles. Cattle may develop a mania and charge persons in the vicinity, while horses may become very sleepy. Critical levels required are not known, but there is no treatment for the effects of eating tansy ragwort.



Livestock will graze on this plant if other forage is not available. Haymaking or ensiling does not destroy the toxic compounds.

In addition to its toxic effects, tansy ragwort can reduce crop yields by up to 50% in heavy infestations.

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### **Control**

A close, dense pasture sward discourages establishment of ragwort. Land should be well plowed and cultivated before reseeding. Mowing causes ragwort to revert to its rosette form and produce a flower stalk the next year, making it a short-lived perennial. Regrowth may occur from root fragments remaining after pulling of plants

Dicamba or 2,4-D may be used to control ragwort. For further information on using these herbicides or for application rates, consult your weed inspector or consult the most recent Guide to Weed Control (Publication 75).

Biological control of ragwort can provide some control for sites that are difficult to cultivate or spray. The cinnabar moth is widely used because its larvae feed on the leaves, buds, and flowers. Other insects, including the ragwort flea beetle, and a root feeding moth have been released in Nova Scotia.

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