

GOLDEN RAGWORT

Most composite flowers are in bloom during the summer or during the fall. However, there are a few species that are in bloom during the spring. One of them is the Golden Ragwort (*Packera aurea* [L.] A. & D. Love).

Golden Ragwort is a member of the *Asterales* Order, the *Asteraceae* or *Compositae* Family (Aster, Composite, Daisy, or Sunflower), the *Asteroideae* or *Tubuliflorae* Subfamily, and the *Senecioneae* Tribe. Previous scientific synonyms for this species were *Senecio aureus* L., *Senecio fastigiatus* Schweintiz ex Elliott, and *Senecio gracilis* Pursh.

The generic name, *Packera*, was named for the Canadian botanist, John G. Packer. The generic name, *Senecio*, is from the Latin word, *senex*, which means “old man”, probably referring to the gray fluffy tufts upon the seeds or to the hoariness of some of the plants. The specific epithets, *aurea* or *aureus*, are from the Latin word *aur*, which is “gold” or “golden”.

At different times and places, this plant has had other common names. Some of them are Butterweed, Cocashweed, Coughweed, Ebbens Root, False Valerian, Female Regulator, Fireweed, Golden Groundsel, Golden Rod, Golden Senecio, Groundsel, Grundy Swallow, Heart-leaved Groundsel, Heart-leaved Ragwort, Life Root, Piunkum, Ragweed, St. James' Wort, Senecio, Snakeroot, Squawweed, Staggerwort, Swamp Squawweed, Uncum, Unkum, Waxweed, and Wild Valerian.

DESCRIPTION OF THE GOLDEN RAGWORT

Perennial

Height: This plant reaches a height of about 6-48 inches.

Stem: The stem is smooth, red-brown, upright, and erect. These stems may branch near the top. Multiple stems may emerge from the roots.

Leaves: These leaves are woolly while expanding but are smooth when fully expanded. Their undersides may be reddish. The Gem Moth (*Orthonama obstipata* Fabricus) larvae eat these leaves.

Stem Leaves: The stem leaves are about 1-3½ inches long. They are simple, alternate, narrow, oblong, and lanceolate (lance-shaped). These leaves are coarsely, deeply, and pinnately lobed, toothed, or serrated. The upper leaves are sessile and clasp the stem. There are very few stem leaves upon the stem.

Basal Leaves: The basal leaves are about ½-6 inches long. The blades are ovate or rounded with a blunt tip and a cordated (heart-shaped) base. These blades are about 1-1½ times as long as wide. Their margins have blunt, coarse, or crenate teeth. Their petioles are long and wingless.

Flowers: The flowers are arranged in branched, flat-topped, open, terminal, and umbelled clusters. Each flower head is about ½-1¼ inch wide and is atop a stalk over ½ inch long. Each flower head has numerous yellow tubular disk flowers and has about 6-16 narrow, twisted, ragged, shiny, and yellow or orange ray flowers. Both the disk and the ray flowers are fertile. These flowers are pollinated by many species of Bees. Their bloom periods last about 3 weeks. Flowering season is usually March-August.

Fruit: The fruit is a 1/6 inches long, glabrous, and purple achene or capsule. Their gray tufted seed heads enable these seeds to travel by wind.

Root system: Their roots are small, thin, and horizontal. Their rootlets are slender and numerous. Their creeping rhizomes and stolons aggressively spread outward and often form entire colonies of this plant.

Habitats: Golden Ragwort inhabits wet areas, either open or shaded. They especially prefer wet woods, wet meadows, swamps, and wet roadsides.

Range: Their range is the eastern U.S. and southeastern Canada, extending as far west as the Great Plains.

Medicinal Uses of the Golden Ragwort

The Native Americans, early European settlers, and herbalists used this plant for medicine. The Cherokee and the Iroquois tribes had many medicinal uses.

Both the leaves and the roots were made into a tea or were made as a decoction or as an infusion. The above ground parts were harvested while the flower was in bloom and the underground parts were either harvested at that same time or a little while later.

This plant was used as an abortifacient, an anti-hemorrhagic, a diaphoretic, a diuretic, an emmenagogue, an oxytocic, a pectoral, a stimulant, a tonic, and a vulnerary. It was used for treating painful childbirth, broken bones, fevers, kidney ailments, heart troubles, lung ailments, and various female troubles. It was used as a substitute for ergot-derived medicines. It was once listed in the *National Formulary* (1916-1936), but not in the *U.S. Pharmacopoeia*.

Toxicity of the Golden Ragwort

Golden Ragwort is also a highly toxic plant. All parts of this plant contain the hepatotoxic pyrrolizidine alkaloids otosenine, senecine, and senecionine. These toxins can cause severe, or even fatal, liver damage to both humans and livestock. They are more toxic to Cattle (*Bos primigenius taurus* L.) than to Sheep (*Ovis aries* L.) or to Horses (*Equus ferus caballus* L.). If consumed by some animal species, these toxins can contaminate milk and honey.

Golden Ragwort also contains other chemicals. They contain the essential oil inuline, volatile oils, resins, and tannin.

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