

Senecio vulgaris

GROUNDSEL is an invasive annual. Native to Europe it has tiny yellow flowers.

It is also known as Birdseed, Canary food, Canary seed, *Cardo morto* (Portuguese),

Cardoncello (Italian), Charlie, Chickenweed, Chickweed, Common groundsel, *Creulys Cyffredin* (Welsh), *Erba calderina* (Italian), *Erba calderugia* (Italian), Fleawort, *Gemeines Greiskraut* (German), *Gemeines Kreuzkraut* (German), *Gewöhnliches Greiskraut* (German), *Gewöhnliches Kreuzkraut* (German), Grimsel, Ground glutton, Groundswell, Groundwill, Grounsel, Grundy-swallow, *Hierba cana* (Spanish), *Korsört* (Swedish), *Krestownik* (Russian), *Kreuzpflanz* (German), *Krunkskruid* (Dutch), Old-man-in-the-Spring, *Peltovillakko* (Finnish), Ragwort, Sencion, *Senecione* (Italian), *Séneçon* (French), *Séneçon vulgaire* (French), *Senetsia tou kino* (Greek), Sention, Simson, Sinsion, *Snichaon* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *S'nichon* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), Squaw-weed, *Starček obecný* (Czech), *Suzón* (Spanish), Swallow-grundy, *Tasneirinha* (Portuguese), *Toute-venue* (French), Wattery drums, *Y Benfelen* (Welsh), and Yellow heads.

It is dispersed by the wind.

Warning – the whole plant is poisonous. It must only be used by a qualified practitioner as large doses can harm the liver. Symptoms may be delayed by several weeks and can include exhaustion, loss of appetite, abdominal pain and swelling, enlarged liver and cirrhosis. It must not be taken internally if pregnant.

[Groundsel provides an example of poor journalism and the dangers exemplified in the old adage ‘familiarity breeds contempt’. Viewed by so many of us today as a weed or acceptable food for some pets, groundsel’s innocuous appearance is misleading. In 1976 a London journalist is said to have advocated its leaves as a salad vegetable. It seems fortunately that this suggestion was quickly withdrawn after a deluge of letters from concerned botanists – and no damage is said to have been reported on this occasion.]

Vulgaris means ‘common’.

The name Groundsel comes from a medieval word *grundeswyle* which itself is derived from an Old English word for ‘earth glutton’ *gundaeswylgæ*. Both the English and French names reflect the plant’s tenacity in growing invariably where it is unwelcome.

Groundsel was believed by Scottish Highland women to be able to offer protection against the evil eye and to this end was often worn as an amulet. In some regions witches were believed to carry a bunch of groundsel to show that they followed the Devil and it was contended that they could only die when groundsel flowered. A patch of groundsel on a thatched roof was a sure indication that a witch had alighted there. Superstition provided a fascinating treatment for toothache. To cure this a groundsel plant was dug up (roots and all) with an iron tool. It was then placed against the painful tooth five times (the sufferer had to spit three times after each application) and then it was replanted in the place from which it had been unearthed. But here the confusion starts as some old herbalists believed that, provided the root had not been unearthed with an iron implement, its smell as it was removed from the ground would be sufficient to cure headaches, and others were of the view that any wound inflicted with iron could be healed with groundsel.

Birds (both caged and free) enjoy the leaves and seeds, as do rabbits – but many animals will reject it. In the countryside in the past farriers used groundsel to cure worms in horses – and the same remedy is said to have been given to German children similarly afflicted. Records show that its more conventional medicinal usage goes back at least to the time of the ancient Greeks when it was turned to primarily for treating period problems. Chosen for various ailments it was reintroduced into Western medicine in 1824 in the treatment of liver diseases, but since then it has been recognized that prolonged intake can actually harm the liver. Herbalists have in the past relied upon groundsel for the treatment of scurvy, jaundice, epilepsy, vomiting, sciatica and kidney ailments particularly. Today the plant's use is no longer recommended although it can be used fresh in homoeopathic treatments.