

## SNEEZEWEED/HELEN'S FLOWER

*Helenium autumnale* and *H. flexuosum*

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

A cosmopolitan plant of great beauty both in the perennial border and the wild garden, sneezeweed likes rich, moist soil in full sun. A long-bloomer from early to late autumn, some isolated plants are still producing flowers in November. Cut back in early spring for shorter plants, and in the fall as well. Sneezeweed benefits from division every two to three years; this plant does well in containers, with light applications of fertilizer during active growth. In warm winters the plants have evergreen basal rosettes serving as groundcover. The spherical yellow seed heads provide winter interest in the arden and are a welcome addition to floral arrangements.

About 40 species of this genus are native to North and South America. *Helenium flexuosum*, blooming in late spring/summer, and *H. autumnale*, a fall bloomer, are widely distributed over Virginia. Sneezeweed grows 2-5 feet tall with abundant daisy like flower heads with prominent pincushion-like centers. The rays of both species are yellow, the center is also yellow in *H. autumnale* and in *H. flexuosum* it is usually reddish. Hybrids appear in autumn colors of golden yellow, flame



red, orange, russet. The rays are turned back, and there are 3 scallops at the tip of each ray; the centers can be very dark to deep red to chartreuse, depending upon the cultivar.

The Latin name refers to Helen of Troy; one story reports these flowers springing up where her tears fell upon the death of Hector. The name, "Sneezeweed," doesn't refer to the pollen, but to the plants past use as snuff. ❖

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**Wildflower Spot – November 2007**  
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

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## SOURWOOD

*Oxydendron arboreum*

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Sourwood is a rewarding tree in all seasons; in spring the tree is covered with lacy white fronds of flowers, suggesting its other name, “lily of the valley tree”. Fall turns the leaves deep red and the fingers of white flowers become clusters of creamy fruits.

Many members of the heath family have small, white, bell-like flowers that are clustered mostly at ends of twigs. Sourwood is the only full-size tree in the heath family with flowers and fruits of the heath type. The sour-tasting leaves are narrow to egg-shaped with a line of hairs on the midvein on the underside.

Hardy to zones 5 to 9, sourwood prefers full to part sun in slightly acidic, moist, well-drained soils, but does well in dry soil. However, the root system is shallow, and it does not transplant well. Sourwood tree trunks do not stand straight and tall, they always lean away from the vertical. When the leaves are gone, these leaning trunks are good identification for sourwood.

This mid-sized tree (20-30 feet tall) ranges from New Jersey south to Florida and



Louisiana, growing in rich woods. It is found in all counties across Virginia except for those in northern Virginia.

With no major pests or diseases, this native tree is worth considering as a landscape element. The flowers attract bees and butterflies, and produce seeds for birds. Sourwood honey can be found in local food outlets. ❖

## AMERICAN BITTERSWEET

*Celastrus scandens*

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

American bittersweet is a twining woody vine that grows vertically or sprawls horizontally over bushes and fences. Blooming in spring, the small, green flowers produce yellow fruit which in the fall develop into hanging clusters of yellow-orange fruit which split open to show bright red-orange seed coats. Plants are male or female, and both sexes are needed for fruit set. Pollination is by insects, especially bees, and also by wind. The vine grows in a wide variety of habitats including fencerows, forest edges and roadsides. Preferring rich, evenly moist soil in full sun or light shade, the plant will tolerate abuse, including heat, drought, and even salt.

Unfortunately the native American bittersweet is declining, while the nonnative Oriental bittersweet (*Celastrus orbiculatus*) is spreading and increasing in abundance. While the nonnative Oriental bittersweet carries fruits in small clusters along the stem, the fruits of the native American bittersweet are twice as large, and grow in profusion at the tips of the stems. The broad oval leaves turn clear yellow in the fall, and then drop, allowing the berries to show to best advantage. This vigorous and robust vine grows 20 feet or more if not pruned.



All parts of the plant are potentially toxic, but the bark extracts were a folk remedy for rheumatism, liver and skin ailments. American Indians used the leaf tea for diarrhea and dysentery.

American bittersweet grows on the Virginia peninsula and in Virginia mountains, ranging south to Florida and Texas. ❖

## SWEET PINESAP, PYGMY PIPES

*Monotropsis odorata*

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

This diminutive (1-4 in. tall) member of the heath family has no chlorophyll at all and is parasitic on soil fungi. Sweet pinesap is a relative of Indian pipes and pinesap, which are in the related genus *Monotropa*. In contrast to *Monotropa*, the petals of *Monotropsis* are fused together to form a cup-like flower (instead of being separate) and the fruit is a fleshy berry (instead of a dry capsule).

Sweet pinesap flowers twice each year, spring and fall. In our area, March/April and October/November are the best times to look for it on upland slopes or in flatwoods (under pine or hardwoods), especially in places where other members of the heath family, such as blueberries and wild azaleas, also grow. A search for sweet pinesap is greatly aided by a good sense of smell. The nodding cluster of several light rose to purple-brown flowers exudes a strong fragrance that can lead you to a plant hidden in the leaf litter. Some describe the fragrance as like violets; others as like cinnamon, nutmeg, or cloves.

Studies of the reproductive biology of sweet pinesap are being conducted in large populations located in Kentucky and Tennessee. Since habitat destruction is threatening this plant, it is hoped that information about pollinators will help its survival.



Sweet pinesap is on the Plant Watchlist of the Virginia Division of Natural Heritage, but it may not be as rare as it seems. It has a wide range in the eastern U.S. but to date it has been found in only 18 counties in Virginia, possibly because it is tiny and easily overlooked. In the coastal plain it is recorded only for James City, York, and Northumberland counties. So, when you are out walking in pine woods, near blueberries and azaleas, be alert for the strong spicy smell that indicates the presence of sweet pinesap hidden under leaf litter. Contact Donna Ware, John Clayton Chapter, Virginia Native Plant Society, so she can report a new county record for this plant!❖



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**Wildflower Spot – November 2011**  
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

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## PURPLE LOVEGRASS

*Eragrostis spectabilis*

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

In late summer and early fall, the flowers and seeds of Purple Lovegrass form clouds of purple, close to the ground, along roadsides and in fields. This is a tufted perennial grass growing to two feet tall, with narrow, flat, firm leaves, tapering at the tip. The flower cluster is still and delicate and extends 2/3 the length of the whole stem. After flowering, the flower stalk becomes tan, breaks away, and floats around like a tumbleweed.



Purple Lovegrass prefers sandy soil and grows in fencerows, fields and dry pinelands in nearly every county in the state of Virginia. Blooming from July through October, the plant ranges from Maine to North Dakota and south to Florida and Texas.

The genus name *Eragrostis* comes from the Greek *Eros*, “god of love,” and *agrostis*, “a grass,” since some of the Old World species were long known as Lovegrass. ❖

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**Photo:** Purple Lovegrass (*Eragrostis spectabilis*) taken by Helen Hamilton  
For more information about native plants visit [www.vnps.org](http://www.vnps.org).

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**Wildflower Spot – November 2012**  
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

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## INDIAN-TOBACCO

*Lobelia inflata*

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton*

Although related to Cardinal Flower, the white to pale blue blossoms of Indian-tobacco are only 1/4 inch long and inconspicuous. The 5-lobed flower is divided, two small lobes on top and three larger lobes below. Blooming a few at a time, they are arranged along angular stems covered with bristly white hairs. When the flower withers, a globoid (inflated) seed pod develops. The lance-shaped leaves have somewhat wavy edges, are two inches long and alternate on the erect stem, 1-3 feet tall.

Indian-tobacco is native to eastern U.S. and Canada, and occurs in every county in Virginia. A summer annual which persists into late fall, the plant grows in meadows, cultivated fields, disturbed sites and woodlands in sun to partial sun. Blooms July-November.

This plant has a long history of use for asthma, bronchitis, pneumonia and cough. Native Americans smoked the leaves to treat asthma. In the 19th century, American physicians prescribed lobelia to induce vomiting to remove toxins



from the body, earning the name “puke weed.” Indian-tobacco contains a chemical related to nicotine, and until recently it was used in lozenges, patches and chewing gums to appease the need for cigarettes. However, the plant is considered toxic because of its strong emetic and sedative effects. ❖

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**Photo:** Indian-tobacco (*Lobelia inflata*) taken by Helen Hamilton  
For more information about native plants visit [www.vnps.org](http://www.vnps.org).

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**Wildflower Spot – November 2013**  
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

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## MARSH ELDER

*Iva frutescens*

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

This bushy-branched shrub is recognized by thick, paired leaves with toothed edges, tapering at both ends. Inconspicuous greenish flowers are surrounded by tiny leaf-like appendages; they appear as green (later brown) spheres arranged on the ends of stems. The shrub grows to 8 feet tall and the branches are often killed back during severe winters. Marsh Elder is often confused with Silverling (*Baccharis halimifolia*) which has coarsely-toothed leaves alternate (not opposite) on the stem.

Well named for its location, Marsh Elder is common in brackish or saltwater habitats such as marsh margins and mud flats. The range is from Nova Scotia to eastern Texas. Growing only in the coastal counties of Virginia, an alternate common name is High-tide Bush. Blooms August-November.

*Iva* is an old name for some medicinal plant; *frutescens* means “shrubby.” During extreme high tides, both small mammals and birds use



Marsh Elder as a refuge, and the dense growth habit provides nesting sites for various species of birds. ❖

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**Photo:** Marsh Elder (*Iva frutescens*) taken by Helen Hamilton  
For more information about native plants visit [www.vnps.org](http://www.vnps.org).



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**Wildflower Spot – November 2014**  
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

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## SEASIDE GOLDENROD

*Solidago sempervirens*

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Of the many goldenrods in Virginia, this is the only one with thick fleshy leaves that have smooth toothless edges. Firm stems with numerous narrow leaves reach up to 6 feet from a rosette of narrow, lance-shaped leaves. A spray of bright yellow flower heads are in curved, one-sided clusters, forming a large mass of blossoms at the ends of stems. Blooming from August-November, goldenrods are a magnet for butterflies, bees, wasps, hoverflies, all preparing for the winter. On a sunny day the blossoms will be covered with busily foraging insects of all shapes and sizes.

This is a plant of marshes and sandy soil near the sea, growing at the edge of salt or brackish marshes, on small dunes and in meadows. Occurring only in the Coastal Plain in Virginia, Seaside Goldenrod is found in salty places along the coast from the Gulf of St. Lawrence to tropical America. The plant has spread inland locally, especially along highways that are salted in winter, reportedly even as far west as Michigan.

Species of goldenrod were used by Native Americans for toothaches, colds, heart disease, sore throats, fevers, cramps, and internal hemorrhage. When the Omaha were on the



summer buffalo hunt, the sight of goldenrod indicated that their corn was beginning to ripen at home. The name comes from Latin *solidus*, and *ago*, “to make whole”, because this group of plants supposedly heals wounds. ❖

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**Photo:** Seaside Goldenrod (*Solidago sempervirens*) taken by Helen Hamilton  
For more information about native plants visit [www.vnps.org](http://www.vnps.org).



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## Wildflower Spot – November 2015

### John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

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# COMMON SNEEZEWEED

*Helenium autumnale*

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Golden, daisy-like petals surround the round, yellow centers of this late summer perennial. The common name is misleading—the plant isn't a weed, and it doesn't cause sneezing, since the pollen is too heavy to be carried by wind. Some Native American tribe members dried the leaves and used them as snuff to cause sneezing, which was supposed to rid the body of evil spirits.

Common Sneezeweed is highly desirable in the fall garden and stunning when paired with purple flowers such as asters and blazing star (*Liatris* spp.). This local native is easily grown in rich, moist soils in full sun. It grows 2–5 feet tall on erect stems, with lance-shaped leaves arranged alternately on the stem, each leaf base continuing down the stem as a wing. The plant can require staking, but can be cut back in early summer to force shorter and more-branched flower heads. Clumps can be divided every few years to maintain vigor and provide new plant starts, or seeds can be collected.

Like other members of the aster family, the showy ray flowers look like petals, with the disk flowers

in the center containing nectar and pollen. The centers of Common Sneezeweed are ball-like and surrounded by fan-shaped, drooping “petals,” each ending in three teeth, which distinguishes this species. Flowers appear in September, and some isolated plants are still producing blooms

in November. After the petals fall, the striking round centers which remain provide winter interest in the garden and can be collected as additions to flower arrangements.

Bitterweed (*H. amarum*) is a taprooted annual with similar flowers, but very narrow leaves. This species may be introduced from the west (botanists disagree about its nativity), but is a very long-bloomer, forming flowers from May through December.

Sneezeweed is attractive to many species of insects; most late butterflies and bees are seeking nectar, and some feed on its pollen. It is a highly desirable pollinator plant, providing food for honeybees, many native bees, wasps, and beetles—all late-season insects preparing for survival over the winter.

Although the straight native species will draw more native butterflies and other insects, many cultivars are available from garden centers and nurseries. Hybrids appear in autumn colors of golden yellow, flame red, orange, russet and their centers can vary from deep red to chartreuse. ❖



**Bitterweed**



**Sneezeweed**

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**Photo:** Common Sneezeweed (*Helenium autumnale*) taken by Helen Hamilton  
For more information about native plants visit [www.vnps.org](http://www.vnps.org).

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## Wildflower Spot – November 2016

### John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

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## VIRGINIA CREEPER

*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

This native perennial is a woody vine that will climb or trail along the ground. It is often confused with poison ivy, which has three leaflets, but Virginia Creeper has five leaflets. The species name *quinquefolia* refers to its five compound leaflets, arranged like the palm of a hand. All spring and summer the vine is covered with bright green leaves that turn brilliantly red in late summer and fall.

Tiny and inconspicuous flowers appear in late spring, followed by blue-black “berries” (drupes) that are fed upon by a wide variety of songbirds during fall and winter.

A vigorous climber, Virginia Creeper fastens onto wood or masonry by aerial rootlets on the stems. When well grown, it will be very difficult to remove and damage to walls and bricks could occur. It can be an excellent cover for trellises, arbors, fences, and walls, and once established will grow quickly. Trimming is necessary to keep it away from windows and roofs.

Virginia Creeper grows well in any soil, including slightly salty, moist to dry, and prefers part shade. The thick foliage provides cover for small animals, and the vines are used by birds for perches and

nesting places. As a groundcover it will control soil erosion in shaded areas and is a great choice for holding soil in place on slopes. A member of the grape (*Vitaceae*) family, Virginia Creeper is found in mature forests in nearly every county of Virginia, and throughout the southern, midwestern and eastern half of the U.S.

The caterpillars of sphinx moths feed on the leaves and birds feed on the fruits, but to humans, the berries can be poisonous if eaten in sufficient quantity. The leaves are astringent and diuretic – Native Americans use a tea from the leaves for swellings, wounds and jaundice.

Cultivars are available in the nursery trade with smaller leaves or color variegations on the leaves. ❖



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**Photo:** Virginia Creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*) taken by Helen Hamilton  
For more information about native plants visit [www.vnps.org](http://www.vnps.org).

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**Wildflower Spot –November 2017**  
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

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## GROUNDSEL TREE

*Baccharis halimifolia*

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Covered with silky white tufts, this shrub is striking, along with goldenrods and other fall-blooming flowers. In late October, the female plant produces these fruits and their coverings. As the fall flowers fade, the silvery appearance of Groundsel Tree persists into winter. Earlier in the fall the male flowers were on another nearby plant - small, yellowish and rounded, they are shriveled by the time the female flowers are forming fruits.

Groundsel Tree has many common names, “groundsel” referring to the cottony tufts on the female plant. Many plants with fuzzy white fruits have “groundsel” in their names – the most common being the introduced weed Common Groundsel *Senecio vulgaris* and Golden Ragwort *Packera aurea*. Other names are Salt-bush, Sea-myrtle and Silverling, a name which best describes the appearance of this small tree in the fall. “Salt-bush” is appropriate, as this plant thrives along roads with heavy salt applications in winter.

This is a plant of coastal areas, growing wherever the soil is moist, the edges of ponds and salt- and fresh-water marshes, but also roadside ditches, old fields and other disturbed areas. Tolerant of drought, heat, and salt spray, Groundsel Tree forms the saltbush zone on the margin of marshes, along with Marsh Elder (*Iva frutescens*).

In nature, male and female shrubs will be growing near each other, since both sexes are required to form fruit. The pollen of Groundsel Tree can be

carried on the wind, which also disperses the seed. Growing vigorously in full sun, in some areas the plant is considered a weed. It is common in the Coastal Plain and ranges to Florida and Texas.

Easy to grow, and tolerant of poor soil, this is a shrub for a home garden with wet habitat and space for several specimens, probably best used in informal screens or mass border plantings.

Plantings of Groundsel Tree will form a barrier against deer – they will not eat this shrub, since the foliage contains toxic substances they have learned to avoid. The male flowers have rich nectar that attracts bees, wasps, hoverflies, butterflies, and other insects seeking food in late summer.

Migrant warblers feed on insects that supply protein for their long journeys. With a stunning display of feathery fruits in the fall, the plant could be part of a careful landscape plan. ❖



**Female plant**



**Male plant**

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**Photo:** Groundsel Tree (*Baccharis halimifolia*) taken by Helen Hamilton  
For more information about native plants visit [www.vnps.org](http://www.vnps.org).



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**Wildflower Spot – November 2018**  
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

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## STARWBERRY-BUSH

*Euonymus americana*

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Strawberry-bush is a shade-loving shrub that goes unnoticed much of the year. Leaves are narrow, long-pointed with fine teeth. In early summer, 1-3 small greenish-purple flowers on slender pedicels lie on top of each leaf. They are followed later with a warty fruit covering, somewhat resembling a strawberry. In the fall, the fruits turn orange-red and burst open to reveal 5 shiny red arils, each of which envelopes a seed – a very attractive display among the leaves now turning yellow.

Although it will tolerate full shade, Strawberry-bush fruits best when provided light shade or full sun. This shrub grows in mixed deciduous forests, low woodlands, and swamp forests, across eastern U.S. and most counties in Virginia. The distinctive green twigs are heavily browsed by white-tailed deer, and in the home garden this plant must be protected with fencing.

The common name “hearts-a-burstin” attempts to describe the appearance of the fruits in the fall. The genus name “Euonymus,” means “good name.” Strawberry-bush was attractive to early colonists and was taken back to England in 1663, where it was widely used in gardening landscapes.

Native Americans used the roots of Strawberry-bush to make a tea for stomach and urinary problems.

But the fruit and bark of this shrub and its relatives contain glycosides that cause severe diarrhea in humans; the berries may also affect the heart, possibly causing cardiac arrest, and are especially dangerous for children. ❖



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**Photo:** Strawberry-bush (*Euonymus americana*) taken by Helen Hamilton  
For more information about native plants visit [www.vnps.org](http://www.vnps.org).

## BLUE-STEMMED GOLDENROD

*Solidago caesia*

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Unlike most goldenrods, this native perennial grows in woodlands and is a good choice for a shade garden. Little clusters of golden flowers are spaced along arching stems that become bluish as they age in late fall, the reason for the common name. The flowers are spaced with oblong leaves that have teeth and are sharply pointed, growing alternate on the stem. The plant never gets too tall, growing 1-3 feet in height.

Blue-stemmed goldenrod forms clumps and does not spread aggressively. While the plant prefers dappled light and well-drained soils, it will tolerate dry, rocky soil and drought. A shaded butterfly garden or woodland edge would be a desirable location.

Native wildlife love all goldenrods -- the flowers are always crawling with native bees, wasps, and pollinating flies that collect nectar and pollen from the flowers, and songbirds eat the seeds. Deer and rabbits seem to leave it alone, although there are reports of deer browse on the leaves in woods.

Goldenrods do not cause hay fever. All members of the aster family produce pollen that is heavy and sticky and requires insects for pollination. Allergic reactions are caused by wind-pollinated

plants like ragweed, grasses and trees like maple and pine that produce large amounts of light pollen carried on air.

Goldenrods are important in fall gardens, producing food for overwintering wildlife while other plants no longer make flowers and seeds. The golden flowers are stunning with late-blooming white and purple asters, all providing ecosystem services. ❖



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## Wildflower Spot – November 2020

### John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

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## DOG-FENNEL

### *Eupatorium capillifolium*

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

In late summer drifts of Dog-fennel line roadsides and woodland edges with their lacy fernlike leaves, narrow and very finely divided. In early fall from September through November, the tiny daisy-like white flowers are replaced by small red berries. As the fruits age, the seeds develop hairs, like those of dandelions, allowing dispersal by the wind.

An attractive plant, Dog-fennel grows over 6 feet tall, and can provide a dramatic backdrop in the garden or containers. But it's a very aggressive weed, even invasive in some areas. It's a



robust native perennial and forms colonies that crowd out other, more delicate plants. There is sterile cultivar called 'Elegant Feather' that has a more benign growth habit and doesn't produce seed.

Dog-fennel grows on the Coastal Plain from New Jersey to Florida, Texas and Arkansas, and in eastern Virginia counties. It is common in habitats where the soil has been severely disturbed, burned areas, clear-cuts, and various moist to wet locales. The plant spreads both by seeds and rootstocks which come from the main taproot and grow laterally in all directions. In *The Flora of Virginia* the description of this plant ends with: "nearly ubiquitous in disturbed habitats of the Coastal Plain"

When crushed, the leaves and flowers release an unpleasant odor. The common name refers to the fennel-like odor, which dogs appear to enjoy. Essential oils of Dog-fennel have shown activity as an insecticide and antifungal agent; leaves have been used to repel mosquitoes and juice from the plant extracted to treat bites of reptiles and insects. Livestock and wildlife usually avoid consuming Dog Fennel since the plant contains liver-damaging alkaloids.

The species name *capillifolium* is derived from the Latin *capill* meaning "hair" and *folium* meaning "leaf," referring to the thin segments of the leaves. ❖

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**Photo:** Dog-fennel (*Eupatorium capillifolium*) taken by Helen Hamilton  
For more information about native plants visit [www.vnps.org](http://www.vnps.org).