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What Is **Tansy** Used for?What Does **Tansy** Look like?

Tansy

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For other uses, see *Tansy (disambiguation)*.

Not be confused with *tansy ragwort* or *tansy mustard*.

Tansy (*Tanacetum vulgare*) is a perennial, herbaceous flowering plant of the aster family, native to temperate Europe and Asia. It has been introduced to other parts of the world and in some areas has become invasive. It is also known as **Common Tansy**, **Bitter Buttons**, **Cow Bitter**, **Mugwort**, or **Golden Buttons**.

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Description

Tansy is a flowering herbaceous plant with finely divided compound leaves and yellow, button-like flowers. It has a stout, somewhat reddish, erect stem, usually smooth, 50–150 cm tall, and branching near the top. The leaves are alternate, 10–15 cm long and are pinnately lobed, divided almost to the center into about seven pairs of segments, or lobes, which are again divided into smaller lobes having saw-



Tansy

Scientific classification

Kingdom: **Plantae**
 (unranked): **Angiosperms**
 (unranked): **Eudicots**
 (unranked): **Asterids**
 Order: **Asterales**
 Family: **Asteraceae**
 Genus: ***Tanacetum***
 Species: ***T. vulgare***

Binomial name

Tanacetum vulgare
L.



Illustration of a tansy

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Q [when to harvest tansy flowers](#)

A 🗨️ Tansy plants are readily recognized by the flat-topped clusters of small yellow, button-like flowers they bear in August. They grow 3 to 4 feet tall in zones 4 to 8 with fern-like tooth-edged foliage....

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toothed edges, giving the leaf a somewhat fernlike appearance. The roundish, flat-topped, button-like, yellow **flower** heads are produced in terminal clusters from mid-to-late summer. The scent is similar to that of **camphor** with hints of **rosemary**. The leaves and flowers are toxic if consumed in large quantities; the volatile oil contains toxic compounds including **thujone**, which can cause convulsions and liver and brain damage. Some insects, notably the **tansy beetle** *Chrysolina graminis*, have evolved resistance to the toxins and subsist almost exclusively on the plant.

History and distribution

Tansy is native to Eurasia; it is found in almost all parts of mainland Europe. It is absent from **Siberia** and some of the **Mediterranean** islands.^[1] The ancient Greeks may have been the first to cultivate it as a medicinal herb.^[2] In the sixteenth century it was considered to be "necessary for a garden" in Britain.^[3]

History of uses

Tansy has a long history of use. It was first recorded as being cultivated by the ancient **Greeks** for medicinal purposes. In the 8th century AD it was grown in the **herb gardens** of **Charlemagne** and by **Benedictine** monks of the Swiss monastery of **Saint Gall**. Tansy was used to treat intestinal worms, **rheumatism**, digestive problems, fevers, sores, and to "bring out" **measles**.^[2] ^[4] ^[5] ^[6] ^[7]

During the **Middle Ages** and later, high doses were used to induce abortions.^[5] ^[8] ^[9] Contradictorily, tansy was also used to help women conceive and to prevent miscarriages.^[4] ^[5] ^[10] In the 15th century, Christians began serving tansy with **Lenten** meals to commemorate the **bitter herbs** eaten by the Israelites.^[7] ^[10] Tansy was thought to have the added Lenten benefits of controlling flatulence brought on by days of eating fish and **pulses**.^[4] ^[5] and of preventing the intestinal worms believed to be caused by eating fish during Lent.^[11]

Tansy was used as a face wash and was reported to lighten and purify the skin.^[4] ^[5] In the 19th century, **Irish** folklore suggested that bathing in a solution of tansy and salts would cure joint pain.^[12] Although most of its medicinal uses have been discredited, tansy is still a component of some medicines and is listed by the United States Pharmacopeia as a treatment for fevers, feverish colds, and jaundice.^[2] ^[5] ^[10]

Insect repellent

Tansy has also been cultivated and used for its **insect repellent** and in the worm warding type of embalming.^[2] ^[5] ^[6] It was packed into coffins, wrapped in funeral winding sheets, and tansy **wreaths** were sometimes placed on the dead.^[2] ^[5] ^[6] ^[10] **Henry Dunster**, the first president of **Harvard University**, was buried wearing a tansy wreath in a coffin packed with tansy; when "God's Acre" was moved in 1846 the tansy had maintained its shape and fragrance, helping to identify the president's remains.^[2] ^[5] ^[10] By the 19th century, tansy was used so much at New England funerals that people began to disdain it for its morbid association with death.^[5] ^[7] During the American colonial period, meat was frequently rubbed with or packed in tansy leaves to repel insects and delay spoilage.^[2] ^[5] ^[10] Tansy was frequently worn at that time in shoes to prevent **malaria** and other **fevers**;^[5] ^[10] it has been shown, however, that some mosquito species including *Culex pipiens* take nectar from tansy flowers.^[13]

Organic insecticide

Tansy can be used as in **companion planting**, and for **biological pest control** in **organic gardens** and **sustainable agriculture**. It is planted alongside potatoes to repel the **Colorado potato beetle**, with one study finding tansy reduced the beetle population by 60 to 100%.^[5] ^[14] ^[15]

In England tansy is placed on window sills to repel flies; sprigs are placed in bed linen to drive away pests, and it has been used as an ant repellent.^[16]

In the 1940s, distilled tansy oil mixed with fleabane, pennyroyal and diluted alcohol was a well known **mosquito repellent**; collectors were paid five cents a pound for tansy in full bloom.^[5] ^[17] Research has found that tansy extracts do indeed repel mosquitoes, but not as effectively as chemical pesticide products containing diethyltoluamide^[5] ^[18] (i.e. **DEET**.) In 2008, researchers in Sweden investigated the use of tansy to repel ticks, showing a 64–72% repellency for each oil constituent.^[19]

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Toxicity

Tansy contains a volatile oil which can cause contact dermatitis in sensitive individuals. If taken internally, toxic metabolites are produced as the oil is broken down in the liver and digestive tract. It is highly toxic to internal parasites, and for centuries tansy tea has been prescribed by herbalists to expel worms. Tansy is an effective insecticide, and is highly toxic to [arthropods](#).^[20] Because it contains



Tansy flower - detail.

[thujone](#), the U.S. FDA limits the use of tansy to alcoholic beverages, and the final product must be thujone-free.^[21]

The active components of the volatile oil include [1,8-cineole](#), *trans*-[thujone](#), [camphor](#) and [myrtenol](#), with the quantities and proportions of each varying seasonally and from plant to plant.^{[5][18][22][23][24]}

1,8-cineole is a toxin believed to defend the plant leaves against attacks by herbivores.^{[22][23]} It has many biological activities including allelopathy, anesthetic, antibacterial, carcinogenic, fungicide, herbicide, insectifuge, nematocide, sedative, testosterone hydroxylase inducer, and others.^{[5][18][22][23]}

Thujone is a GABA receptor antagonist that sensitises neurons; it is reputed to be an aphrodisiac, increasing brain activity and causing hallucinations, spasms, convulsions, and even death.^{[22][23]}

Camphor has various uses, including manufacture of plastics, lacquers and varnishes, explosives and pyrotechnics; as a moth repellent; as a preservative in pharmaceuticals and cosmetics; to relieve itching and pain by creating a cooling effect on the skin; as an injectable antibacterial for root canals in dentistry; as a food flavor enhancer; and as a medical ingredient in [chest rubs](#).^{[22][23]}

Myrtenol has been used as an insect pheromone in insect trapping, as a beverage preservative, a flavoring and a fragrance.^{[22][23]}

Culinary uses

Tansy was formerly used as a flavoring for [puddings](#) and [omelets](#), but is now almost unknown. The herbalist [John Gerard](#) noted that tansy was well known as "pleasant in taste", and he recommends tansy sweetmeats as "an especial thing against the gout, if every day for a certain space a reasonable quantitie thereof be eaten fasting." In [Yorkshire](#), tansy and [caraway](#) seeds were traditionally used in biscuits served at funerals.^[11]



Tansy foil

During the [Restoration](#), a "tansy" was a sweet omelette flavoured with tansy juice. In the BBC documentary "The Supersizers go ... Restoration", [Allegra McEvedy](#) described the flavour as "fruity, sharpness to it and then there's a sort of explosion of cool heat a bit like peppermint."^[25] However, the programme's presenter [Sue Perkins](#) experienced tansy toxicity.

According to liquor historian A. J. Baime, in the 19th century [Tennessee whiskey](#) magnate [Jack Daniel](#) enjoyed drinking his own whiskey with [sugar](#) and crushed tansy leaf.

Ethnomedical use

For many years, tansy has been used as a [medicinal herb](#) despite its toxicity. 19th-century [Irish](#) folklore suggests bathing in a solution of tansy and salt as a cure for joint pain.^[12] A bitter tea made with tansy flowers has been used for centuries as an [anthelmintic](#) to treat parasitic worm infestations, and tansy cakes were traditionally eaten during [Lent](#) because it was believed that eating fish during Lent caused intestinal worms.^[11] Various *Tanacetum* species are used [ethnomedically](#) to treat [migraine](#), [neuralgia](#) and [rheumatism](#) and as [anthelmintics](#). Traditionally, tansy was often used for its [emmenagogue](#) effects to bring on menstruation or end an unwanted pregnancy, and pregnant women are advised to not use this herb.^[26] Research published in 2011 identified 3,5-[dicafeoylquinic acid](#) (3,5-DCQA) and [axillarin](#) in tansy as antiviral compounds that are active against [herpes simplex virus](#).^[27]

Other uses

In England, bunches of tansy were traditionally placed at windows to keep out flies. Sprigs were placed in bedding and linen to drive away pests.^[28]

Tansy has been widely used in gardens and homes in Melbourne, Australia to keep away ants.

Some traditional dyers use tansy to produce a golden-yellow colour.^[29] The yellow flowers are dried for use in floral arrangements.

Tansy is also used as a **companion plant**, especially with **cucurbits** like **cucumbers** and **squash**, or with **roses** or various berries. It is thought to repel ants, cucumber beetles, Japanese beetles, squash bugs, and some kinds of flying insects, among others.

Dried tansy is used by some bee-keepers as fuel in a bee smoker.



Tansy (Tanacetum vulgare)

Tansy in art and literature

A poem by **John Clare** describes the delights of tansy and other herbs:

*And where the marjoram once, and sage, and rue,
And balm, and mint, with curl'd-leaf parsley grew,
And double marigolds, and silver thyme,
And pumpkins 'neath the window climb;
And where I often, when a child, for hours
Tried through the pales to get the tempting flowers,
As lady's laces, everlasting peas,
True-love-lies-bleeding, with the hearts-at-ease,
And golden rods, and tansy running high,
That o'er the pale-tops smiled on passers-by.*

From "The Cross Roads; or, The Haymaker's Story", available from a [collection](#) at Project Gutenberg.

Tansy Strange, a wild character in *The Jem Star* by Karen Drury, is named after this wild herb.

Tansy is mentioned several times in *The Maximus Poems* by **Charles Olson**, a book of projectivist poems composed as letters taking place in **Gloucester, Massachusetts**.

Teddy Kent, a character in **L. M. Montgomery's Emily of New Moon** series, lived in a place called the Tansy Patch.

From *A Girl of the Limberlost*, ch. 18, by **Gene Stratton-Porter**: "Later she went out beside the west fence and gathered an armful of tansy which she boiled to a thick green tea. Then she stirred in oatmeal until it was a stiff paste. She spread a sheet over her bed and began tearing strips of old muslin. She bandaged each hand and arm with the mixture and plastered the soggy, evil-smelling stuff in a thick poultice over her face and neck. She was so tired she went to sleep, and when she awoke she was half skinned ... at night to go through the same process ... By the third morning she was a raw even red, the fourth she had faded to a brilliant pink under the soothing influence of a cream recommended ...The following day she was a pale pink, later a delicate porcelain white"

In the motion picture *A Knight's Tale* (2001), among other medieval culinary treats, the character Wat mentions "tansy cakes with peppermint cream."

Tansy Tea is used to prevent or abort pregnancy in the fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire* by **George R. R. Martin** and *The Night Angel Trilogy* by **Brent Weeks**, Also known as "moon tea" in the *A Song of Ice and Fire* series.

Oil of tansy is used by a pregnant woman in John Irving's *'The Cider House Rules'* in order to induce miscarriage. The drug destroyed her intestine's ability to absorb vitamin C and she died from scurvy.

See also

Common ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*) which in some regions is called "tansy ragwort"

Silverweed (*Potentilla anserina*) a flowering plant once known as "wild tansy"

List of companion plants

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