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# Spotlight on...



## Toxic Weed - Common Groundsel

**Name:** Common Groundsel (aka Groundsel; “Old-man-in-the-Spring”)

**Scientific Name:** *Senecio vulgaris*

**Description:** Common Groundsel is an herbaceous winter annual growing 16 to 24 inches tall. The plant grows a single stem or branches from base. The leaves are variable, ranging from hairless to covered in cotton-like hairs. The deeply lobed leaves have toothed edges, are evenly spaced and attach directly to the stem. Its yellow flowers bloom as tight clusters at the tip of the flowering stem. The flower head matures into a white puffball similar to a dandelion seed head.



Common Groundsel  
*Senecio vulgaris*

**Distribution:** Common Groundsel is native to Europe but commonly distributed throughout the United States. It grows in fields, orchards, vineyards, roadsides and other disturbed areas. It is a serious weed pest of alfalfa and hay fields. It can grow all year in coastal areas of California.

**Toxic parts:** All parts including leaves, stems, and flowers are poisonous. The toxic chemical in Common Groundsel is senecionine, a pyrrolizidine alkaloid. Consumption of 5-10% of bodyweight within a few days causes acute liver disease in cattle. Chronic exposure (25-50% bodyweight over several months) results in liver disease. The toxin persists even in the dried plant parts.

**Signs and Symptoms of Poisoning:** In cattle, chronic exposure results in appetite and weight loss. In horses chronic exposure results in appetite loss, weight loss, walkabout disease, head pressing and elevated liver enzymes.

**Testing available at CAHFS:** Pyrrolizidine alkaloid toxin testing is available at CAHFS. The best matrices for testing are plant material, ingesta, and rumen content.

Plant identification testing is available at CAHFS. Weeds suspected of being Common Groundsel or as being present in hay or alfalfa can be identified in hay flakes or individual plant submissions. Whole leaves or large fragments of leaves, stems, and fresh or dried flower heads are most useful in identifying Common Groundsel.

*See the lab tests and fee page for test information and pricing.*

**Links:**

[ANR: Livestock Poisoning Plants of California](#)