

Groundsel-tree

by Garry Plunkett

Groundsel-tree will never be the centerpiece of a landscape design, but it is a native plant with many interesting features. I first discovered it one autumn day many years ago while wandering around the salt marsh at Fogland Beach in Tiverton. I came upon this unfamiliar shrub completely covered with little white feathery flowers and wondered if it was an escaped ornamental. Checking *Newcomb's*, however, I discovered that groundsel-tree is a native species found in "open woods and thickets from Mass. south along the coast."

It is also called groundsel *bush*, which actually is more appropriate given its size and tendency for multiple stems. By either name groundsel is not prominent in the regional New England natural landscape. One reason it may go unnoticed might be the company it keeps, often growing among several deciduous species around upper salt marshes as part of Rhode Island's *maritime shrublands* plant community. In fact, when not in bloom it can be confused with marsh elder (*Iva frutescens*) because of similar leaf shapes and habits. The two are easily distinguishable, however, since groundsel has alternate leaves compared to opposite leaves for the marsh elder.

Though groundsel is pretty much a coastal species in New England, it is widespread throughout the U.S. Southeastern Coastal Plain, where it grows in ditches, old fields, and roadsides as part of several natural communities of the southeastern states. I have seen thickets of it along stretches of I-40 while driving across the flat rice fields of eastern Arkansas.

Groundsel is a *dioecious* species, the female bearing the conspicuous white flower-heads. Each flower is composed of a tuft of silky hairs (botanically, a *pappus*), wrapped by a red sheath around the base. This always reminds me of a tiny shaving brush (notable to those of us who remember this once common bathroom implement!).

For most of the growing season there is nothing particularly notable about a groundsel bush. But late in the year its flowers appear, and that can be a visual focal point in a landscape at a time when there is little else to catch the eye. This is after the bright summer colors are gone, even after fall foliage has about played out. That's when the female groundsel explodes with bright flowers, *and* another visual gift—a subtle change in the color of its foliage. This transition from summer green to a bluish hue, perhaps the first stage of the autumnal process, is subtle but results in a pleasing contrast to the white flowers. And it can be enjoyed for a long time, well into November-December, because groundsel is one of the last of the broadleaf plants to pack away for the winter.

Native groundsel is also a good soldier in the New England ecology, providing cover and nesting habitat for various species of birds. Bees and small butterflies use the abundant nectar from male flowers, which in turn attract songbirds to forage on the insects. Unfortunately, these ecological benefits have not transferred to other areas of the world where it has been introduced. This is a classic example of a plant species that has natural controls within the biome where it evolved, but creates problems in an alien ecosystem. It has become an invasive weed in grasslands and parklands of Western Europe and Australia. Consider this statement taken from a New South Wales government website:

Groundsel bush is both an environmental and a forestry weed because it readily invades open to densely vegetated forests and bushland. Thousands of hectares of pine plantations in New South Wales (NSW) and Queensland are heavily infested. Thick stands of groundsel bush can inhibit the movement of stock and reduce the productivity and carrying capacity of

Baccharis halimifolia

Family: Asteraceae



agricultural land. Therefore, the spread of the weed is of great concern to rural communities, especially where annual rainfall exceeds 1000 mm per year.

Readers who have dealt with Multiflora Rose, Autumn Olive, and Blunt-leaved Privet are probably thinking, “I share your pain!” This unhappy story should not deter New Englanders from planting and enjoying groundsel where it is part of the native ecosystem. It can be cultivated in a sunny location and is suitable for a wide range of soils and moisture conditions. It does not tolerate heavy clay soils but is perfectly happy in nutrient-poor areas, like the sandy coastal plain habitats where it is often found. As one would expect from a coastal plant it is resistant to salt spray, making it particularly useful on properties near the coast. It is fast growing and quickly recovers from severe pruning, which means it can be trained to a small tree form if desired.

of a nearby nursery. Never one to pass up an opportunity to add another native shrub to my little ecosystem, I brought one home and have been quite happy with it at the edge of my meadow.

This led to RIWPS stocking several of the plants at the summer plant sale this year, all of which were sold. Maybe this is the start of something big!

Sources:

Websites:

<http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/agriculture/pests-weeds/weeds/profiles/groundsel>

http://plants.usda.gov/plantguide/pdf/pg_baha.pdf (Natural Resources Conservation Service Plant Guide)

RIWPS Policy

Never dig plants in the wild or without the written permission of the landowner. Take seeds sparingly.

Note: “Cultivation Note” is a regular feature in WildfloraRI, the Bulletin of the Rhode Island Wild Plant Society. If you would be interested in writing a future cultivation note article or have suggestions of plants you would like to see included, please contact Dick Fisher at Richard.Fisher2@cox.net. The previous cultivation note topics are listed on the website and there is an easy to follow set of guidelines for the format of your article. — WildfloraRI Editorial Committee.

Rhode Island Wild Plant Society