

The Weekly Plant

14 September 2014

Common names: weakleaf bur ragweed, slimleaf bursage, slender ragweed

Scientific name: *Ambrosia confertiflora*^{1,2}

TAV location: There are two spots along our roads to see this plant: across the road from lots 173-180 and across the road from lot 148.

Discussion

Have you been sneezing a lot lately? Do you have itchy eyes and a stopped-up head? Welcome to fall hay fever season!

There are many plants that cause hay fever.³ One of the best known is ragweed. This Week's Plant is weakleaf bur ragweed, a perennial found in the Southwest US and adjacent Mexico and just one of 50 or so species of ragweed.

Plants that cause hay fever produce lots of airborne pollen. This pollen provokes the allergic reaction in sensitive individuals that results in sneezing and other hay fever symptoms. But why produce lots of pollen? Some plants depend on animals to move pollen from one flower to another. These plants spend their

energy producing scent, nectar, and showy flowers that attract animal pollinators.

Other plants depend on wind to move pollen from one flower to another. They maximize the chance that pollen will land on another flower by producing lots and lots of pollen. You can get a sense of the effort a wind pollinated plant puts into producing pollen by looking at ragweed flowers.

Ragweed is in the aster family though it doesn't produce the showy daisies usually associated with this family. Each flower cluster has only disc flowers that are small and dull. Additionally, all ragweeds are monoecious⁴, having flowers that are only male

or only female, not both, as is more common. The flower clusters are held on a long stem. In the photo to the far left you can see many clusters with male flowers (the yellow ones) and just barely see the



2 smaller clusters with female flowers (arrow). I count 28 clusters of male flowers and only 2 clusters of female flowers, an indication of the energy the plant puts into producing pollen, just to pollinate a few female flowers.

Weakstem bur ragweed can grow to 3 ft, but is usually 18 inches or less in the Village. The alternate leaves have many lobes and small lobed appendages at the leaf base. Flowers are produced in late summer/fall. The fruit is covered with hooked spines that attach to fur, hijacking animals to help spread the seed.

This ragweed is typically found in disturbed areas (roadsides, cleared areas) and spreads readily via underground stems. Such stems make a plant difficult to control - killing the top growth doesn't kill the plant (may actually stimulate more growth) and attempts to dig up the plant can spread around pieces of the underground stem. Chemicals such as RoundUp may offer some control, but I haven't had much luck with this method either. I sprayed a patch of ragweed last fall with RoundUp - twice - and the plants came back this year. This ragweed is a US problem and, unfortunately, is considered an "emerging invader" in Europe. You can read the details of this plant's exploits in Israel and Australia at [https://www.eppo.int/QUARANTINE/Alert List/invasive plants/Ambrosia confertiflora.htm](https://www.eppo.int/QUARANTINE/Alert_List/invasive_plants/Ambrosia_confertiflora.htm).

¹ Tropicos is the source of the currently accepted scientific name: <http://www.tropicos.org/>. ² The reason such troublesome plants are called "Ambrosia"? Don't know. My references say "allusion unclear". ³ Other hay fever-causing plants include pine, willow, poplar, birch, olive, ryegrass and timothy.

⁴ Other monoecious plants include corn, squash, and birch.



Left: flower stalk with male flower clusters (yellowish) and female flower clusters (arrow). Top center: male flower clusters and yellow pollen. Bottom center: close-up of female flower cluster. There are several flowers. The "wormy" things are part of the female sexual organ (the styles). Right: close-up of leaf base. The arrow shows the lobed appendage.