



“Butterweed is abundant near Brownsville.”

FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Senecio tampicanus*

Common Names: Butterweed, Groundsel

Family: Compositae, Daisy

Bright Yellow Blossoms Border and Cover Fields

It's worth a country drive to see fencerows and fields adorned with massive expanses of Butterweed this spring. On closer examination, one sees bright yellow flower clusters on a very green herbaceous plant a foot or so tall. This is *Senecio tampicanus*, one of the earliest of yellow spring composites. It has leaves which are

deeply divided into round lobes.

“The inflorescence of *Senecio* is unmistakable,” Mike Heep remarks. It is, I realize, how I recognize the plant. How one uses words to describe that unmistakable quality is something I've yet to discover. What I offer by way of description is a photograph.

The species of *Senecio* which occur in Texas are annual and herbaceous. They have a variety of names. Groundsel is perhaps the oldest. Squaw Weed is another.

There are perhaps 3000 species throughout the globe, including trees, shrubs, vines and desert succulents.

At least 14 species are recognized in Texas and every part of the state has at least one species of *Senecio*. It's difficult to differentiate them. There are many different sizes and shapes of leaves and other minute differences.

The botanists have named and renamed them, probably even as I write this article.

Along roadsides near Brownsville, I photographed *Senecio tampicanus*, formerly named *S. imparipinnatus*. This species occurs in Tamaulipas, Texas, Oklahoma and Louisiana.

Another name for the plant is *S. glabellus*, which Geyata Ajilvsgi includes in *Wildflowers of Texas* (1984). Agilvski notes that *glabellus* is easy to cultivate, with flower clusters which last for several weeks. She also points out that a pale yellow dye may be obtained from the bloom.

The foliage of groundsel reminds me of spring greens. It would seem perfect for cooking or eating raw. In retrospect, I'm glad that I haven't tasted any part of the plant.

John and Gloria Tveten report: “Most of the *Senecio* species contain toxic alkaloids and have been suspected in livestock poisonings. Human deaths have occurred from using the leaves in

herbal teas. Ingestion results in liver disease, for which there is no known cure.” (*Wildflowers of Houston & Southeast Texas*, 1993.)

The hepatotoxic compounds produced by groundsels are pyrrolizidine alkaloids. “Milk from grazing animals and honey from *Senecio* nectar reportedly contain the alkaloids...” (Shinners & Mahler’s *Flora of North Central Texas*, 1999.)

Everitt & Drawe include a photo of *Senecio spartioides* in *Trees, Shrubs & Cacti of South Texas*, 1993. This plant, with finely-divided linear leaflets, is often slightly succulent or fleshy. It is poisonous to cattle, horses, sheep and goats.

Despite known toxicity, Native Americans used the foliage of groundsels in poultices for wounds and abscesses. Ancient Greek and Arabian physicians also used Old World species for healing. Groundsels got their name from *grundeswelge*, meaning “pus-absorber.” When you think about it, most medicines are poisonous if administered incorrectly.



If you visit Boca Chica beach in winter or spring, you might encounter another groundsel, *Senecio riddellii*. This species occurs on sand dunes along the coast. It’s a somewhat woody perennial with more or less succulent leaves which are greatly dissected. The flower heads resemble those of other groundsels in their bright yellow color and appearance. One individual was blooming at Boca Chica beach on November 23, 2002.

It is very difficult to identify a species of Groundsel with certainty. But it isn’t difficult to admire them.

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