
Wildflower Spot – November 2020

John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

DOG FENNEL

Eupatorium capillifolium

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

In late summer drifts of Dog-fennel line roadsides and woodland edges with their lacy fernlike leaves, narrow and very finely divided. In early fall from September through November, the tiny daisy-like white flowers are replaced by small red berries. As the fruits age, the seeds develop hairs, like those of dandelions, allowing dispersal by the wind.

An attractive plant, Dog-fennel grows over 6 feet tall, and can provide a dramatic backdrop in the garden or containers. But it's a very aggressive weed, even invasive in some areas. It's a



robust native perennial and forms colonies that crowd out other, more delicate plants. There is sterile cultivar called 'Elegant Feather' that has a more benign growth habit and doesn't produce seed.

Dog-fennel grows on the Coastal Plain from New Jersey to Florida, Texas and Arkansas, and in eastern Virginia counties. It is common in habitats where the soil has been severely disturbed, burned areas, clear-cuts, and various moist to wet locales. The plant spreads both by seeds and rootstocks which come from the main taproot and grow laterally in all directions.

In The Flora of Virginia the description of this plant ends with: "nearly ubiquitous in disturbed habitats of the Coastal Plain"

When crushed, the leaves and flowers release an unpleasant odor. The common name refers to the fennel-like odor, which dogs appear to enjoy. Essential oils of Dog-fennel have shown activity as an insecticide and antifungal agent; leaves have been used to repel mosquitoes and juice from the plant extracted to treat bites of reptiles and insects. Livestock and wildlife usually avoid consuming Dog Fennel since the plant contains liver-damaging alkaloids.

The species name *capillifolium* is derived from the Latin *capill* meaning "hair" and *folium* meaning "leaf," referring to the thin segments of the leaves. ❖

Photo: Dog-fennel (*Eupatorium capillifolium*) taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.