

Roadside “Rags” - May 2012

Look for blue and gold these days. In full bloom now are Small's Ragwort and Raggedy Sailors. These blossoms are abundant on roadsides and in fields. If you have access to them they can make a really nice wildflower arrangement.



Mother Nature's Bouquet

Ragwort grows throughout the southeast and as far north as Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Illinois. It is a member of the aster family and its blossoms illustrate the typical composite of blossoms appearing as a single flower. Typical for this group, outer petal or ray flowers surround a tight round cluster of disc flowers. Stem leaves are feathery lobed and basal ones are toothed.

Plant taxonomists are botanists responsible for scientific naming of plants. This process is always evolving, as taxonomists work to have plants in groups that best reflect their natural relationships. Taxonomy is now assisted by DNA technology. Often evidence from various sources results in reclassification and renaming of a species. Such has been the

case with Small's Ragwort. The common name is in honor of botanist J. K. Small. The scientific name *Senecio smallii* was suggested by botanist N.L. Britton, who wished to name it for colleague J.K. Small. It had however, already been named *Senecio anonymous* by A. K. Wood in 1861! The genus name *Senecio* from *senex*, "old man," refers to the gray hairiness of many plants in this group. Now the South Carolina Plant Atlas, and other sources give the scientific name *Senecio anyomus* Wood crediting the botanist who first named it. But most recently Small's ragwort has been classified to another genus *Packera* giving it a third name (synonym) *Packera anonyma* Wood ! So, to give credit to all who worked on classification of this ragwort, it is listed: Small's Ragwort AKA Southern Ragwort (*Packera anonyma* / *Senecio anonymous* / *Senecio smallii*). So what's in a name?



Blossom color variations

Raggedy Sailors, AKA Bachelors Button and Cornflower, blooms mostly in shades of blue, but can also be lavender, pink or almost white. These are also members of the aster family; however, unlike Small's ragwort, flowers composing the blossom are disc type only. Also, whereas ragwort is a native species, raggedy sailors originated in Europe. Since spreading throughout the United States, it is considered a “naturalized” species. It is also cultivated and widely

available for planting in gardens.

Raggedy sailors' scientific name is *Centaurea cyanus*. According to "A Modern Herbal" by Mrs. M. Grieve: "The Latin species name, cyanus, was given the flower after a youthful devotee of the goddess Flora (Cyanus), whose favorite flower it was, and the name of the genus is derived from the Centaur, Chiron, who taught mankind the healing virtue of herbs." *Cyanus*, from Greek roots, also means "deep blue."

Ragwort has been used for various ailments medicinally by Native Americans, though the plants contain several toxic alkaloids. Raggedy Sailors have a long history of medicinal uses dating back to early European herbalists. Teas and compresses are used externally for antiseptic properties.



Roadside Small's Ragwort



Ragwort blossoms close, ray flowers surround cluster disc flowers



Blue Raggedy Sailors on a road bank