

Coltsfoot (*Tussilago farfara*)

Identification:

Coltsfoot might be easily confused with a dandelion. The flower heads resemble the dandelion but are much smaller, only about one inch in diameter. Upon close inspection the observer will recognize that coltsfoot is a member of the Asteraceae (Asters) Family. It has a small central disc of yellow fertile flowers with a ring of bright yellow bracts. The bracts act as advertisement luring insect pollinators to the fertile flowers.



Coltsfoot flowers grow on solitary stems up to 12 inches tall. Small scale-like leaves cover the stems.



The plant's true leaves will emerge after the flowers have gone to seed. These leaves give us the common name as they are thought to resemble a young horse's foot. Other common names mirror this notion: Ass's Foot, Bull's Foot, Foal's Foot. The leaves will collect energy to store in an underground rhizome so that the plant may bloom again next spring. Both flower stalk and leaves are usually gone by late summer.

Natural History:

Coltsfoot is an invasive weed and is banned from sales in both Massachusetts and Connecticut. Coltsfoot is found in all the states of the Northeast and extends as far south as Tennessee and as far west as Michigan. It is prominent along roadsides and other disturbed landscapes.

Some moths and butterflies may feed on the nectar, but otherwise the plant has limited wildlife value.



Significance:

The genus name comes from two Latin words, *Tussis* meaning “cough” and *ago* meaning “to act on.” Traditionally Coltsfoot has been used to treat respiratory ailments. In fact, it is believed that European immigrants are responsible for Coltsfoot’s presence in the New World. The plant was likely brought as part of their herbal cabinet. It has been recorded as early as 1840 in the United States.

Coltsfoot does contain pyrrolizidine alkaloids which have been linked to liver disease. As a result Germany banned the sale of Coltsfoot products.

Coltsfoot is the only member of its genus.