



Weeds and Sneezes

RAGWEEDS are getting well into bloom now, in the southern part of their range, and within a week or two at most they will be going full blast all the way up to the Canadian boundary. Full blast, too, will be the reëchoing chorus of sneezes from millions of afflicted hayfever victims. As the clouds of pollen rise, showers of unwilling tears descend from reddened, smarting eyes.

Quite a number of plant species shed hayfever-causing pollen, especially during the early hayfever season, before the ragweeds open hostilities: grasses (whence the malady's name), narrow-leaved plantain, several kinds of trees, especially oaks. But all these are as nothing to the two species of ragweed responsible for at least 90% of all hayfever cases in the United States. There are other late-summer hayfever weeds, too: marsh elder, cocklebur, one or two minor ragweed species. But these are only secondary nuisances. Ragweeds, tall and low, are the real villains of the piece.

Tall ragweed, botanically *Ambrosia trifida*, fits its name so far as height is concerned, for it rears its coarse, rough-skinned stalk to as much as 12 or 14 feet, with an abundance of equally rough, broadly three-lobed leaves — whence the specific name *trifida*.

Low ragweed is low only by comparison with its tall relative, for while it ordinarily grows about knee-high or a little more, it can, as a cornfield weed on rich soil, easily become waist-high, even shoulder-high. Its botanical name is *Ambrosia artemisiifolia*. That formidable-looking specific name is in reference to its leaves, which are finely subdivided like the leaves of sagebrush; the generic

name of sagebrush is *Artemisia*. (Where the ragweeds got their much-too-complimentary name of *Ambrosia* is difficult to guess.)

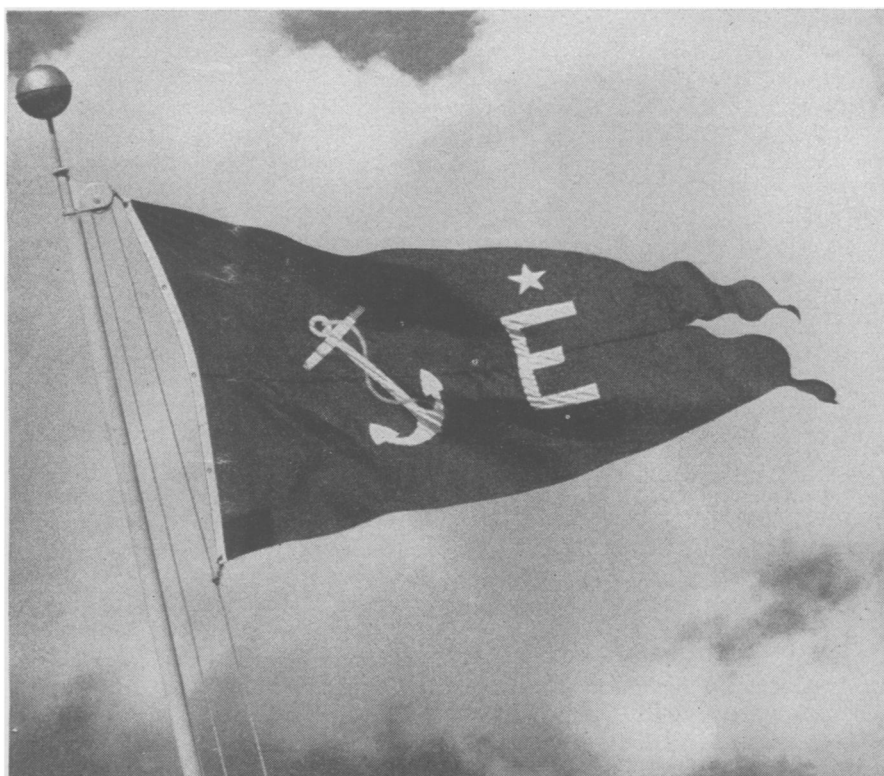
Both species like good soil. That is why low ragweed infests cornfields and tall ragweed stands in dense thickets on the alluvial floodplains of prairie creeks and rivers. Foliage of both is distinctly unappetizing to livestock; low ragweed grows thick in overgrazed pastures, but is never eaten.

Flowers of both species are much alike. The female and male blossoms

are borne separately. The former are inconspicuous little nubbins hidden among the leaves, and don't count in the hayfever story. The male flowers, which also lack any trace of ornamental petals or sepals, are clustered on branching spikes at the ends of the branches. They are just pollen factories. And are they efficient for evil!

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