Plant common name: **Common Ragwort**

Latin name: *Senecio jacobaea*

Scientific family name: **Asteraceae**

Plant Height: medium to tall and up to 1.5m

Flowering period: June -October

Provides: pollen and nectar, though crude pollen average at around 20%

Utilised by: many insects including: hoverflies (various members of sub-species); bumble bees especially short-tongued bees like the red-tailed bumble bee; solitary bees like the leaf cutter bee, mining bee, and cuckoo bees; and honey bees. 150 species of bees feed on ragwort in the UK. It is a great favourite of the cinnabar moth caterpillar because the pyrrolizidine alkaloids it ingests makes it taste bitter to other animals who avoid it. Butterflies flock to ragwort.

Honey: yes, but not a major source of honey. It provides a good proportion of late summer honey, mixed with heather, in my area. The honey is deep yellow, like the wax produced during a nectar flow, and has the unmistakable odour redolent of sweaty socks which dissipates after a few weeks. The initially strong and unpalatable taste (to some) also dissipates to become a delicious honey.

**Ragwort**

There are around 2,000 species of ragwort which is also known as “stinking Willie” in Scotland because it is thought to have been brought north amongst horse fodder by William, the Duke of Cumberland (also known as “Butcher Cumberland) in the eighteenth century.

Ragwort is not a farmer’s friend because of its hepatotoxic pyrrolizidine alkaloids which cause liver damage (cirrhosis) to stock animals. Cows and horses don’t actually like it for it has a bitter taste, but if it is dried and mixed with hay the bitter taste dissipates though the toxins remain and are usually fatal with no antidote. It could harm humans too but this is unlikely unless large quantities of pure ragwort honey were ingested.

Controversy surrounds this plant because of the damaging effects on grazing animals, and yet it is one of the most beneficial plants for many pollinators at the end of summer and farmers need pollinators. In the 1960’s farmers were legally required to remove all ragwort from their land but this is not followed through today and it proliferates in many agricultural settings. Presumably hay is not produced in such vast quantities as it was back then. It is rare to see a hayfield in Nairnshire amongst the wheat, barley and oil seed rape crops.

I know that my bees utilise ragwort because I eavesdropped in on their waggle dances in my observation hive and followed them to the field in the next hamlet where they foraged on patches of bright yellow flowers. Knowing that goldenrod is closely related to ragwort I planted some in my garden and the bees cover it completely from early morning onwards during the flowering period.

**Pollen** under the microscope (x 600 magnification)

Colour: yellow

Shape: round

Exine features: spines, no rods

Surface: pitted due to spines

Number of apertures: 3

Aperture type: furrows

Other features: copious oily pollenkitt covering pollen grains which were deliberately not de-greased