

UCCE Master Gardeners of Lake Tahoe (Invasive) Tahoe Plants and Trees Wooley Mullein – *Verbascum Thapsus*

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The Wooley or Common Mullein is one of those plants that looks like it belongs here in the Tahoe Basin but is in reality not a native plant, originating in Eurasia. It is considered a noxious weed in some states and an invasive weed having a limited environmental impact statewide in California. The plant is fairly common in disturbed areas, especially dry gravelly areas next to water channels and soil benches of braided streams. Mullein is also found along roadsides and in reclamation areas. The Common Mullein is a member of the figwort family (Scrophulariaceae) that also includes our many types of native Indian paintbrush (*Castilleja* spp.) and the non-native garden snapdragon (*Antirrhinum majus*).

The plant is an annual, biennial or short lived perennial (depending on environmental conditions) that during the first year (or 2) maintains a compact basal rosette of wooly, grey green oblong-obovate leaves, that may be up to 10 inches in length. During the second (occasionally 3rd) year a central flower stalk forms with leaves of decreasing size along the lower portion of the flower stalk. Under favorable conditions the flower stock may reach 5 foot or more in height. Cold and numerous freeze thaw cycles have little effect on the appearance of the leaved basal rosette, which is one of the first plants to emerge from winter dormancy. The flower stalk may remain erect, though dry and dead for a season or more.

The many small yellow flowers are tightly packed along the inflorescence and tight to the flower stalk. Calyx and petals are 5 lobed. Numerous seeds are contained in each of two capsules per flower. The plant dies after flowering. Reproduction is sexual with flowers capable of self-pollenating. A large plant can produce 1000s of seeds. Seed dispersal is relatively close to the parent plant. Seeds are long lived, being viable for over 50 years, if below the soil surface.

One of the primary reasons for listing of the plant as a weed is that it can be a host for quite a number of agricultural and garden insect pests. A second reason is the numerous long lasting seeds that quickly sprout when brought to the surface during tilling, or shoveling. Control by hand removal, before the flower stock matures is probably the simplest way for the home gardener, though chemical herbicides are effective especially when applied early in the season prior to germination or new growth of common garden plants.

The plant appears to have been introduced to North America by settlers early on, and was at one time thought to be a native plant in part because of its wide dissemination, and numerous uses for the plant by tribes and settlers. The plant has quite a few regional names, perhaps reflecting introductions by different groups. Locally in Tahoe, Wooley Mullein seems the common usage. Other names are, big taper, common mullein, flannel mullein, flannel plant, great mullein, mullein, velvet dock, velvet plant, Cowboy toilet paper, hig candlewick, indian rag weed, bullicks lungwort, Adam's-rod, hare's-beard, ice-leaf, blanket mullein, beggar's blanket, Moses' blanket, poor man's blanket, Our Lady's blanket, old man's blanket, and feltwort – to name a few.

There are many references on use of the plant for medicinal purposes, including for coughs and pulmonary conditions. Tea type infusions made from the leaf, root or flower were common as were

inhalation methods from smoking or burning portions of the plant. Poultices from portions of the plant are said to help rashes, sores, athlete's foot and even hemorrhoids.

Non-medical uses include infusing the dried flower stalk with bees wax for use as a torch or in religious ceremonies. The yellow flowers can be boiled to make dye that is reported to have been used as a hair color rinse, and there always is cowboy toilet paper which is pretty much self-explanatory.

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