Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 76 (2010)
Heft: [2]

Artikel: Huflattich = Märzeblüemli = Coltsfoot = Tussilago farfara
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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-944149

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HELVETIA
Magazine for Members of the Swiss Society of New Zealand Inc

FLORA IN SWITZERLAND

Huflattich – Märzeblüemli – Coltsfoot – Tussilago farfara

Do you remember those Frühlingspaziergänge? And when you discovered Märzeblüemli, you felt winter was over? I have never seen Märzeblüemli in New Zealand, and I don't want to see one either, as I'm sure they'd spread like wildfire and soon be considered a noxious weed.

Tussilago farfara

Tussilago farfara is a perennial herbaceous plant that spreads by seeds and rhizomes. It is often found in colonies of dozens of plants. The flowers, which superficially resemble dandelions, appear in early spring before dandelions appear. The leaves, which resemble a colt's foot in cross section, do not appear usually until after the seeds are set. Thus, the flowers appear on stems with no apparent leaves, and the later appearing leaves then wither and die during the season without seeming to set flowers. The plant is typically around 10 cm in height.

Coltsfoot is native to Europe and Asia. The plant is often found in waste and disturbed places and along roadsides and paths. It is also a common plant in North America and South America where it has been introduced..

Tussilago farfara, commonly known as Coltsfoot in English, has been used medicinally as a cough suppressant. The name "tussilago" itself means "cough suppressant." Coltsfoot has also become a popular confectionery product made by using Coltsfoot essence to create a hardened rock that is used to soothe sore throats and chesty coughs; the recipe has been developed exclusively by Stockley's Sweets of Oswaldtwistle, UK and has become a favourite medicinal sweet around the globe known simply as Coltsfoot rock.

The plant has been used historically to treat lung ailments such as asthma as well as various coughs by way of smoking. Dried coltsfoot is often used as a tobacco alternative, notably in Amsterdam, since the legal status of tobacco was tightened in August 2008. Crushed flowers supposedly cured skin conditions, and the plant has been consumed as a food product.

The discovery of toxic pyrrolizidine alkaloids in the plant has resulted in liver health concerns. Senecionine and senkirkine, present in colstfoot, have the highest mutagenetic activity of any pyrrolozidine alkaloid. There are documented cases of coltsfoot tea causing severe liver problems in an infant, and in another case, an infant developed liver disease and died because the mother drank tea containing coltsfoot during her pregnancy. In response the German government banned the sale of coltsfoot. Clonal plants of colstfoot free of pyrrolizidine alkaloids were then developed in Austria and Germany.

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