

Artemisias- Choose Your Species Carefully

By Susan Camp

One day last week, Jim stopped on the walkway up to our kitchen door and looked down at the green stuff growing in the sloping strip between our house and the woods. I say “green stuff” because it isn’t turfgrass, but a mixture of various weeds and white clover that Jim planted to help combat erosion and improve the soil, and (ouch), a border of mugwort that I unknowingly introduced with some herb cuttings I brought from another site several years ago.

I say “Ouch,” because mugwort is not a plant you want in your lawn or garden. Common mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*), like all 200 to 400 *Artemisia* species, is a member of the Aster (daisy) family of herbaceous perennials or woody shrubs. Many *Artemisias* are native to eastern and southern Europe, Eurasia, and northern and southern Africa and were introduced into North America. Others are western North America and Mexico natives.

Numerous species have found homes in American gardens, where their silver-gray foliage and aromatic fragrance enhance the beauty of beds and borders. *Artemisias* will grow in poor to fertile, well-drained soil with dry to medium moisture. Most species tolerate deer, rabbits, drought, erosion, and dry or rocky soil.

Unfortunately, some *Artemisias* cannot handle our high summer humidity and develop root rot when planted in soil that drains poorly. In addition, the stems can become leggy and flop during the summer, although pinching them back in late spring or early summer and giving the tops a light shearing will improve their appearance.

Popular garden species include *Artemisia absinthium* or wormwood, a woody perennial with deeply cut, silvery-green leaves and a strongly aromatic fragrance. *A. absinthium* is the primary ingredient in the bitter alcoholic spirit known as absinthe, banned in the United States from 1912 to 2007. Wormwood contains a potent chemical called thujone, which was used in the past as an herbal remedy for malaria and intestinal parasites, hence its common name. Its use is not recommended today.

‘Powis Castle’ is a small hybrid cultivar of *A. absinthium* and *A. arborescens* (large wormwood) that reaches a mature height of 2 to 3 feet with a similar spread. With its feathery silver foliage and small size, ‘Powis Castle’ is a popular addition to rock gardens and border fronts.

Artemisia abrotanum, or southernwood, is a woody perennial shrub with a camphor or citrus-like fragrance. Its history in the United States reaches back to the early 1600s, and it has naturalized in the northeast. Southernwood can be used to form a low hedge or border.

Native North American species include western sagebrush (*A. californica*), planted for erosion control, and white sage (*A. ludoviciana*), although neither are members of the sage (*Salvia*) family. Attractive white sage cultivars include ‘Silver King’ and ‘Silver Frost.’

We finally return to common mugwort, a clump-forming perennial with soft, fern-like, bright green leaves and a sneaky habit of filling up every empty square inch of earth. Mugwort has a

long history of medicinal and culinary uses, especially in Asian cooking, so it sometimes finds a home in the herb garden but is not welcome in beds and borders.

You can mow mugwort, but don't till it, because each morsel of root will sprout into a new plant. This is why Jim was on his hands and knees, meticulously pulling up each tiny plant. When he had finished, the section of clover lawn along the walkway was once again pristine. This week, tiny mugwort babies are popping up along the walkway. Some tasks are never-ending.

Artemisias spread aggressively by rhizomes and self-seeding and must be controlled or they can form thick mats and take over your garden or lawn. Some like *A. vulgaris* and *A. absinthium* are listed as noxious weeds in certain midwestern states. None of the Artemisias are listed on the current Virginia Invasive Plant Species List.

Find detailed information on Artemisias in the NCSU Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox and the Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder.