

SAGEWORT WORMWOOD

Artemisia campestris ssp.
caudata (Michx.) Hall &
Clements
plant symbol = ARCAC

Contributed By: USDA, NRCS, National Plant Data Center



USDI, GS, NPWRC

Alternative Names

Western sagewort

Uses

Ethnobotanical: Both the Lakota and the Dakota used sagewort wormwood (*Artemisia campestris*) for medicine (Kindscher 1992). The Lakota made a tea from the roots to remedy constipation, inability to urinate, and difficulty in childbirth (*Ibid.*). Blackfoot runners chewed leaves for stamina. The Blackfeet also chewed the leaves of sagewort wormwood for stomach troubles and applied the chewed leaves to rheumatic joints and sore eyes (Kindscher 1992). A tea of fresh leaves was drunk to abort difficult

pregnancies. The Blackfeet stored the dried leaves for use in a tea that was drunk to relieve coughs and applied externally to relieve eczema. The Shuswap use a decoction of sagewort wormwood for coughs, colds, and tuberculosis (Moerman 1986). They also make a poultice of steamed branches and apply it to bruises and sores.

Wildlife: Sagebrush furnishes essential cover for many of the smaller desert animals (Martin et al. 1951). Its foliage and flower clusters constitute most of the diet of the sage grouse, and these parts together with the twigs are the primary source of food for antelope and mule deer. Other mammals that browse the foliage and stems include jackrabbits,

black-tailed rabbits, white-tailed rabbits, cottontails, chipmunks, gophers, ground squirrels, various species of mice, prairie dogs, kangaroo rats, and white-throated wood rats. Elk and mountain sheep browse on the foliage and twigs. Range cattle also make good use of sagebrush as forage.

Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status, such as, state noxious status and wetland indicator values.

Description

General: Sagewort wormwood (*Artemisia campestris*) is a smooth-stemmed biennial herb 3-10 dm (1-4 ft) tall with stems arising singly from a prominent taproot. This species is without the typical sagebrush odor that is common to most *Artemisia* species. The basal leaves are numerous, sometimes persistent and sometimes deciduous. These leaves are 2-3x compound, and each leaf is 2-10 dm long and 1-4 dm wide. The cauline leaves are less divided and become more reduced as they ascend the stem. The inflorescence of numerous small heads is an elongate but narrow panicle. The fruits are dry, smooth, broadly cylindrical achenes. The mature achenes are sub-cylindric and hairless. Sagewort wormwood flowers from August to September.

The lactone glycosides, santonin and artemisin, are probably found in all *Artemisia* species and account for their anthelmintic properties (Moore 1979). Thujone, a terpene-like ketone and essential oil, is also found in the plant and may be responsible for some of its medicinal effects (Kinscher 1992). However, it is poisonous in large doses. The Food and Drug Administration classifies *Artemisia* as an

unsafe herb containing “a volatile oil which is an active narcotic poison” (Duke 1985).

Distribution

For current distribution, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Web site.

Establishment

Adaptation: Sagewort wormwood grows in open places, and is often found growing in sandy soil. Sagewort wormwood is circumboreal, and its southern range occurs in Oregon, Arizona, Michigan, and Vermont.

Most of the wild sages are abundant in their natural habitats. White sage and other *Artemisia* species can be propagated by seeds or by cuttings taken in the early summer (Kindscher 1992).

Propagation from Cuttings: Sagewort wormwood spreads vigorously from a prominent taproot. Plants can easily be divided and replanted.

- In greenhouse conditions, it is best to dig up and separate plants in late fall or winter. This is the “quiescent” period that follows seed maturation, and leaves are senescent (dried up and brown colored).
- Split the plant clump into pieces by hand, then cut the plant into sections, each with one or more buds.
- For dividing the whole plant, gently loosen the soil around the plant, taking care to not damage the roots, and then lift the plant gently with a pitchfork. Shake off as much soil from the roots as possible.
- Divide the plant into smaller pieces by hand, retaining only healthy, vigorous sections, each with new buds.
- Replant the divisions as soon as possible. It is important the plants don’t dry out, so if replanting is delayed a couple of hours, dip the plants briefly in water and keep them in a sealed plastic bag in a cool, shady place until you are ready to plant them.
- Cut back the old top-growth and replant the divided plant sections to the same depth as before.
- When replanting, ensure that the roots are well spread out in the planting hole and the plant firmed in. Water newly planted divisions thoroughly; take care not to expose the roots by washing away soil when watering.

- Plants should be planted in the full sun in a light, loose soil. Plants should be planted on 12-18” centers.
- As plants are becoming established, the rooting zone needs to be kept moist.

Propagation by seed: When the soil has warmed to at least 45°F (7°C) in the spring, sow hardy *Artemisia* species where they are to flower.

- Seeds can also be sown in pots or seed trays and either out-planted in their final positions in late fall or over-wintered in a cold frame to be out-planted in spring. This technique is particularly useful in gardens with clay soil that is slow to warm up in spring.
- The two main methods of sowing outdoors are broadcast and drills. For both, prepare the seedbed first by digging over the soil to one spade depth, then rake over and firm.
- Broadcast Sowing: Sprinkle seeds thinly and evenly on the surface of the prepared seedbed and rake them in lightly. Label the seedbeds, then water the area gently, but thoroughly, with a fine spray.
- Sowing in drills: Use either a trowel tip or the corner of a hoe, mark out shallow drill holes 3-6” (8-15 cm) apart, depending on the ultimate size of the plant. Sow seeds thinly and evenly by sprinkling or placing them along each drill at the appropriate depth. Carefully cover with soil and firm. Label each row and water gently but thoroughly with a fine spray.
- To prevent overcrowding, the seedlings usually need to be thinned. To minimize disturbance to a seedling being retained, press the soil around it after thinning the adjacent seedlings.
- Water the newly establishing seedlings fairly frequently until the roots have developed.

Management

The following information on the *Traditional Resource Management* (TRM) was provided by Lynn Youngbuck, who is Cherokee, Chiracahua, and Fox. TRM includes the following:

- Take only what you need, leaving the best to reproduce.
- Speak to the plant, leave an offering of tobacco or sage before harvesting. The plant will grow back two stems for every one cut.
- We humans are another strand in life. Plants sustain us and should be treated as another living being.
- Plants were taken care of by extended family groups of women. They were taken care of and watched each year for generations.

- Materials harvested were shared and traded with the whole tribe.

Cultivars, Improved and Selected Materials (and area of origin)

ARCAC is available from native plant nurseries within its range. Please check the Vendor Database, expected to be on-line through the PLANTS Web site in 2001 by clicking on Plant Materials.

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