

Teasel
Dipsacus
Caprifoliaceae



Nobody walks by a teasel plant. Everybody stops and takes another look. It is tall; its leaves are sword shaped and look like they mean business; its stalk is spiny and its flowers wild like a thistle.

The reward comes with a third very close up look. Its leaves form a cup around the stalk. There is water in each cup.

You can think about this water gift in many ways. If you are a Romany gypsy, this magic water under your eyes will keep you youthful and wrinkle free.

If you are studying evolving plants, this water is a sign teasel is half way there in becoming a carnivorous plant. Studies have shown seed set is greater in a teasel plant that has captured many insects in its leaf cup.

But if you are a teasel plant, you know inside your plant cells that storing water is a good move. You can drown insects that want to suck the life out of you or distort your growth, and you can use it on hot dry spells with no rain in sight.

The common name 'teasel' comes from an Old English word *taesl* relating to the verb tease. The dried heads of the plant were once used in the textile industry to raise the nap on woollen cloth. By the 20th century, teasels had been mostly replaced by metal cards. These can be made uniformly and do not require constant replacement as the teasel heads wear.

Some people who weave wool today prefer to use teasel. They feel the result is better. Also, if a teasel meets resistance in the fabric, it will break, whereas a metal tool will rip the cloth.



dried seed head of teasel



leaves form a cup around stem holding water

The genus name *Dipsacus* comes from the Greek word for thirst of water and refers to the cup-like formation where the leaves merge at the stem. The genus *Dipsacus* has 15 species of tall herbaceous biennial plants growing from 1 - 2.5 metres tall and native to Europe, Asia and northern Africa.

Common teasel (*D. fullonum*, syn. *D. sylvestris*) and cut-leaved teasel (*D. laciniatus*) have both been observed as invasive species in United States. Common is more widespread, but cut-leaved is more aggressive. Teasel love disturbed land and quickly establish themselves.

Teasel has spread rapidly in the last 20 to 30 years aided by the construction of the interstate highway system. It has colonized many areas along interstates, growing in open sunny habitats ranging from wet to dry conditions.

Lyme disease has been spreading rapidly too. Research is being done on teasel's properties in dealing with Lyme disease. If the results are good, teasel can be forgiven for its invasive ways.

(Bed 32 in the Mediterranean Garden at VanDusen has 15 plants of common teasel (*Dipsacus fullonum*) planted in 1974.)

Sources:

<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dipsacus>

<https://www.inhs.illinois.edu/research/vmg/teasel/>

<https://www.fs.fed.us/database/feis/plants/forb/dipspp/all.html#86>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4971593/>