



# “Musing from the Hill” by Susan Crossett

as seen on the *Dunkirk Observer* on Fridays  
and the *Jamestown Post-Journal* on Saturdays



## One Great Big Glorious Wildflower

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The pages of my wildflower album number 190, all with photographs I've taken on the property with one exception, and that found just a ways down the road.



Definitely one of the tallest, this could rise to ten feet, looking like a giant husked corncob, the yellow flowers in corncobby rows.

Common mullein, *Verbascum Thapsus*, is known by its upright appearance, fuzzy leaves, and yellow flowers. The name comes from the Latin “mollis” which means soft. Even its nicknames sound nice: velvet leaf, flannel plant, big taper, cowboy toilet paper.

Sometimes also called woolly mullein, in its first year it only grows low rosettes of bluish gray-green felt-like very hairy leaves 4-12 inches in length and 1-5 inches wide. It's in the second year that it becomes exceptionally noticeable growing from five to ten feet with that conspicuous flower stalk and a deep tap root. Its five-petaled yellow flowers are arranged in a leafy spike and bloom slowly – a few at a time, maturing on the stalk from the bottom to the top in successive spirals. Each flower opens before dawn and closes by mid-afternoon – from June into August. The leaves are alternate with those growing larger at the base. The six-sided seeds are tiny, pitted and rough with wavy ridges and deep grooves. I thought they

looked like Chex cereal. Individual plants produce 200-300 seed capsules, each with 500-800 seeds, so that a plant may produce 100,000 to 240,000 seeds. After flowering the entire plant dies but be warned: Those seeds can lie dormant for several decades. In fact, viable seeds have been found in soil samples archaeologically dated from A.D. 1300!

Common in some places this is not considered an aggressively invasive species. Found throughout Canada and the United States, it needs a growing season of at least 140 days with sufficient rain (50-150 cm). It's intolerant of shade and needs open ground to germinate. Only short- and long-tongued bees are effective in cross-pollination.

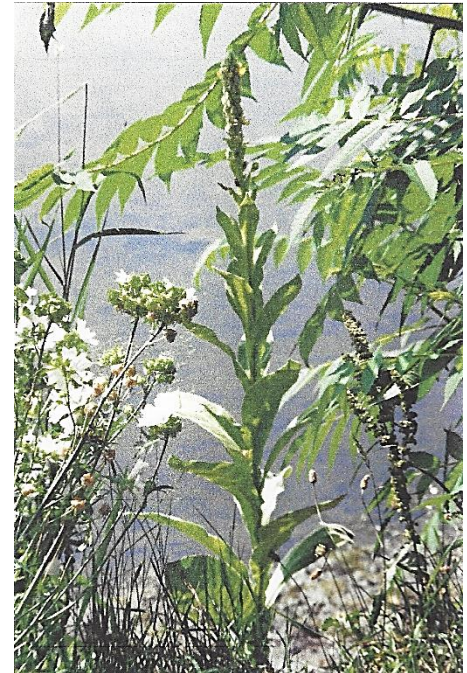
A biennial brought over from Europe by settlers, it was also used as a respiratory stimulant when smoked. A methanol extract has been used as an insecticide for mosquito larvae. Native Americans utilized it for ceremonial and other purposes, as an aid in teething, rheumatism, cuts, and pains. Roman soldiers are said to have dipped the stalks in grease for use as torches. The leaves are still used as wicks in some areas. Indians lined their moccasins with the leaves to keep out the cold, and colonists used them in their

stockings for the same purpose. A tea or syrup made from the leaves was used for throat and lung problems, and the flower and roots were employed to treat various ailments from earaches to croup. The leaves are sometimes applied to the skin to sooth sunburn and other inflammations. The herbalist Nicholas Culpeper, writing in the 17th century, also recommended mullein as a cure for warts, using the dried roots or the juice squeezed from the flowers or the leaves. Yellow, green or brown dyes can be made depending on how the flowers are processed. Others grow it as an ornamental. It was so well established that it was described as a native plant along the East Coast by 1818.



A nonmedical use for mullein is the bright yellow dye that can be extracted from the flowers. But the most charming use of all is to pull a few of the large, soft leaves from the plant in spring and offer them to a child as a doll blanket.

Should this strange plant be considered a danger? Not as far as I can tell. While very difficult to eradicate once it's established and it will grow faster than native plants (due to those copious, long-lived seeds) it does require open areas with poor to average soil.



Find a plant . . . or even two? I'd say cherish it. It's quite unusual. And will die within two years.

Just watch out for those seeds.

Written September 15, 2021.