Growing *Serratula tinctoria*

Saw-wort, Dyer's Plumeless Saw-wort

Origin

This is a native of the UK and Most of Europe with its range extending well into western Asia.

Description

Serratula tinctoria is a long lived herbaceous perennial which grows to a height of around 50-70cm but can grow higher when in competition with other plants. It is a slow growing plant of grassland preferring full sun though it does tolerate partial shade. In general appearance it is easily mistaken for Lesser Knapweed but has a few highly distinguishing features beginning with the fine serration of its leaves (after which the plant was named) and the distinctive "scales" of its flower bud. The flowers are purple though commercially you can obtain a variety originating in Spain and Portugal called *Seoanei* which is pinkish. Flowering is in July to August and seed heads open in August to September.

Propagation

Propagation is not easy. It can be grown from seed but the seed is slow to germinate taking one or more months. Germination rates can also be poor. If growing at home you may find that the seeds need to be stratified before germination is attempted. The seed should be kept wet at a low temperature (around 5˚C). I recommend sowing into a small seed tray of wet compost and keeping in your fridge for about 2 – 4 weeks then bring out and place in a propagator or enclose in a plastic bag on a sunny windowsill until the seeds begin to germinate.

If you have purchased a plant or two you may wish to propagate by self-seeding. The most successful way to do this is to remove any surrounding plants so that there is a patch of bare earth around it. Although the seed is wind spread it typically does not go more than a metre away. Do not cover the bare earth with mulch and water regularly.

Mature plants also produces basal rosettes which can be split off from the parent plant with roots attached and potted on.

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Keeping your plants alive

Although there are pests of Saw-wort none seem to do very much harm that I am aware of. The biggest danger appears to be allowing the plants, particularly when small, to be crowded out by other faster growing larger plants. So keep weeds under control and cut back any plants that threaten to cover your Saw-wort up.

Saw-wort in the wild appears to have two favoured growing conditions, wet, alkaline, very low nutrient, bog land and dry, moderate nutrient, acidic grasslands. Plants may have genetically diversified to suit these two habitats. For the gardener this means they do not like rich soils and would prefer to be left alone when the fertiliser is doled out. Although they grow in dry pasture land they don't seem to mind wet conditions. But apart from that they will happily grow in any type of soil.

Harvesting

Saw-wort is a slow growing plant and never gets very big. If your primary reason for growing plants is to use them as a source of dye then you may be better off growing Weld which is far more productive.

It takes a good 2-3 years before the plant is big enough to start harvesting. The leaves contain several yellow dyes. As a pasture plant Saw-wort is used to being eaten by animals so harvesting will not kill them. However, if you want the plant to produce a display of flowers for the garden and nectar for bees and other pollinators you need to harvest the leaves in early summer before they have produced any flower stalks. They will then happily grow back. The leaves can be used fresh or dried and produce a warm yellow.

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