

Chamomile

Chamaemelum nobile



Chamomile is an attractive, low-growing herb with daisy-like flowers. It forms distinctive lawns of rosettes of feathery leaves that are strongly aromatic, releasing a fresh apple-like scent when crushed underfoot. The flower head, which is 18 - 25mm in diameter, is formed of reflexed, white ray florets surrounding a central yellow cone of disc florets. Chamomile's distinctive scent helps to distinguish it from the similar-looking Scentless Mayweed *Tripleurospermum inodorum*, as do the papery, oblong scales at the base of the florets, (seen if the florets are removed from the receptacle).

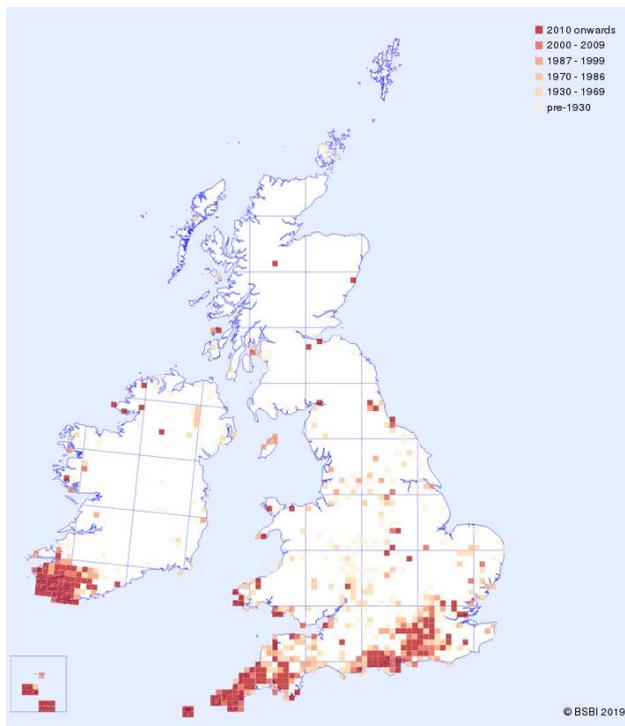
The name Chamomile is derived from the Greek, *khamai*, meaning "on the ground," and *melon*, meaning apple. The flower has many uses as a soothing medicinal herb.

Lifecycle

Chamomile is a long-lived perennial plant that flowers from July to September. Although it can reproduce by seed, it spreads mainly vegetatively by rooting from the nodes of creeping stems, which can grow 10-15cm per year. It cannot self-pollinate and seed germination requires a complex arrangement of alternating temperatures and high light levels. It forms only a transient seedbank.

Habitat

Chamomile is a plant of close-grazed or mown grassland, found on moist, fairly nutrient-poor and mildly acidic soils that are wet in the winter, such as in shallow depressions. It is particularly associated with village greens, commons, coastal grasslands and playing fields. It is often found with other species of note such as Coral Necklace *Illecebrum verticillatum*, Yellow Centaury *Cicendia filiformis*, Pennyroyal *Mentha*



Chamomile distribution across Britain and Ireland.

The data used to create this map has been provided under license from the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland (BSBI) and accessed from the Society's online database.

pulegium, Pillwort *Pilularia globulifera* and Upright Chickweed *Moenchia erecta*. Its semi-prostrate habit allows it to persist in situations with high levels of grazing or frequent mowing.

Distribution

Chamomile was once widespread throughout southern, western and central England and southern Ireland. In the UK, it is now largely confined to the New Forest, The Lizard, the mid-Cornish moors and Bodmin Moor, Dartmoor, the Scillies, coastal Pembrokeshire and the Gower Peninsula. There are currently two populations known from Dorset. It is widespread in western Europe from Belgium, southwards to Algeria and the Azores and north to Donegal.

GB status and rarity

Due to substantial declines, it is categorised as Vulnerable in England and Endangered in Wales.

Protection under the law

This plant is included as a species “of principal importance for the purpose of conserving biodiversity” under Section 41 (England) of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006.

Survey method

The clonal growth form of Chamomile means that individual plants cannot be counted. However, the area occupied by mats formed by the plant can be mapped and assigned a measure of abundance or percentage cover. Depending on the scale of the population, this can be achieved using grid squares at an appropriate resolution.

Reasons for decline

Habitat loss and the cessation of livestock grazing on commons and village greens caused the decline of this species. Drainage and the use of artificial fertilisers and broad-spectrum herbicides has been a particular problem where Chamomile is found on amenity grasslands such as cricket and football pitches, locations at which it otherwise benefits from very regular mowing. The loss of unmade tracks with flower-rich verges on heathlands have also contributed to its decline.

Habitat management for Chamomile

Ideal management for Chamomile generally involves livestock grazing. This helps to maintain open conditions - Chamomile is easily out-competed by taller grasses if these are not suppressed. On sites where Chamomile is able to persist through regular mowing, clippings should be removed.

Seasonally wet areas should be retained on sites where Chamomile is present. The use of herbicides should of course be avoided, as should fertilisers (which promote the growth of more vigorous species at the expense of Chamomile). A degree of disturbance (for example from livestock, walkers and horse riders) can help by creating suitable patches of bare ground within which it can spread clonally, or by seed in optimal conditions.

Chamomile is able to vigorously re-colonise ex-arable fields and ex-pasture and is one of the first species to benefit from landscape scale restoration projects of heathland landscapes.



Corfe Common, a Dorset stronghold for Chamomile.

References and further reading

[Back from the Brink management series “Managing your land for Chamomile”](#) Plantlife

[Chamaemelum nobile species account](#), Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland

[Chamaemelum nobile core species information sheet](#), National Museum Wales

Chamomile by H. Winship & C. Chatters in Stewart, Pearman and Preston 1994 *Scarce Plants in Britain* JNCC

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