

Managing your land for chamomile



PLANTLIFE

What is chamomile?

Chamomile is a member of the daisy family, and looks a bit like our common 'daisy-chain' daisy, except that it has bigger flowers and feathery leaves. Its fresh apple scent is unmistakable, and its Latin name means 'ground apple'.

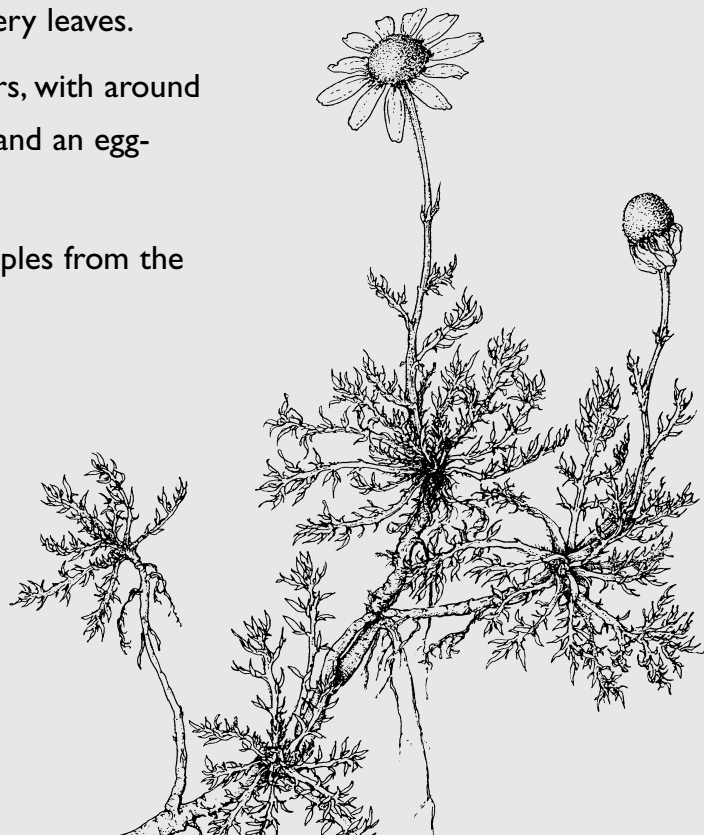
Chamomile was revered by the Egyptians for its many uses. Not only was it strewn on floors as an air-freshener, but it was also an important herbal remedy. Its roots are said to be a wonderful treatment for toothache.

What does chamomile look like?

The illustrations in the leaflet will give you an idea of what chamomile looks like. It is a low-growing (often ground-hugging) plant. Look out for:

- Fresh, green, feathery leaves.
- Typical daisy flowers, with around 18 white ray petals and an egg-yellow centre.
- A fresh smell of apples from the crushed leaves.

- A papery scale at the base of the white ray petals, which tells you that this is chamomile, and not one of its commoner relatives, the mayweed.

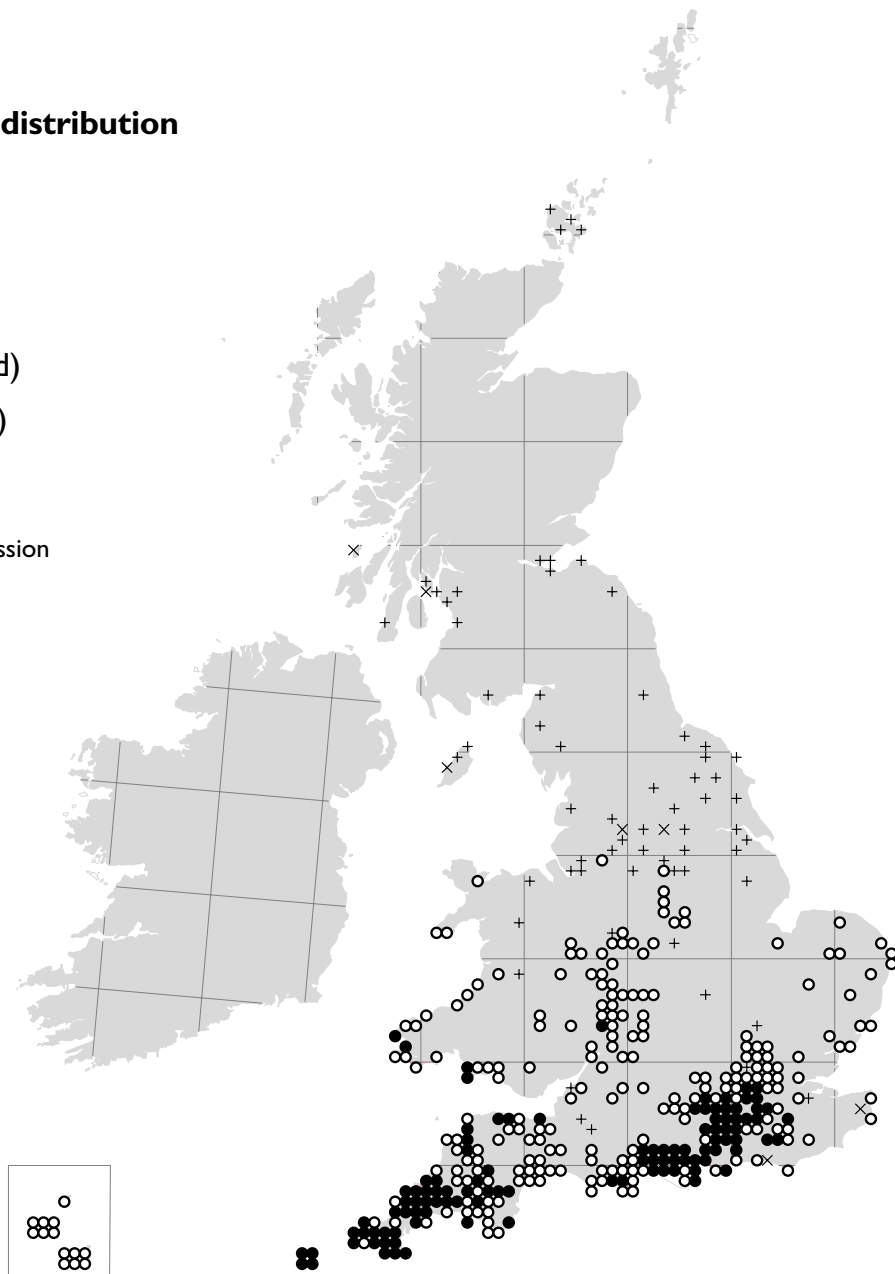


Chamomile was found historically on sandy commons, cliff-top grasslands and clearings in damp woods in Britain. Sadly, northern populations have all but disappeared and it has become scarce even in the south, where it was once widespread. Strongholds remain in the Scilly Isles, the south west of England and the New Forest.

Current and historical distribution of chamomile.

- Post-1990 (native)
- Pre-1990 (native)
- × Post-1990 (introduced)
- + Pre-1990 (introduced)

Data source: New Atlas of the British and Irish Flora (by permission of DETR, BSBI and CEH)



How does chamomile live?

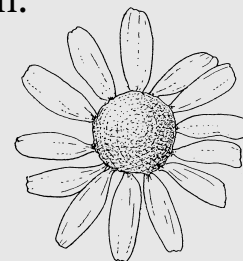
Chamomile can be a long-lived plant in the right conditions. It spreads either by seed, or by stems which root in the ground. It is adapted to living in closely grazed grass, and so is tolerant both of stock-grazing and of some mowing regimes. Amongst the commoner plants with which it is associated are bird's-foot-trefoil and tormentil.

Why is it declining?

Chamomile, like many scarce plants, has very particular needs. It has declined because of changes in the way we manage our countryside. Chamomile likes open sunny situations, and thrived in the past on land where grazing animals kept down taller plants and created areas of open ground which it could colonise. It can grow in fairly rich soils, but if artificial fertilisers are heavily applied to pastures, these encourage vigorous, nitrogen-hungry plants which may out-compete chamomile. It is also killed by the herbicides which are often applied to lawns and pastures to control 'weeds'. Chamomile flourishes best in areas which are prone to winter flooding. The extensive drainage of grasslands in the last hundred years has also helped to hasten its loss.

Reasons why chamomile has declined in Britain:

- Loss of former grasslands and heaths.
- Drainage of winter-wet areas in grasslands.
- Conversion of pastures to arable land.
- Decline of grazing on old pastures, heaths and commons.
- Loss of unmade tracks and their associated flower-rich verges.
- Increased use of artificial fertilisers and herbicides.



Hope for the future

Fine colonies of chamomile can still be found in some parts of the country like the New Forest; precious places, where traditional land management supports a wonderful variety of wildlife. But what about places where chamomile once grew and is now in decline? There is hope here too. We can manage the land in a way which will protect remaining populations of chamomile and encourage it to re-colonise nearby ground. If you have chamomile on your land, you can help. With some straightforward management, you can create conditions where this special plant will once again form sweet-smelling lawns, as it does in the glades of the New Forest.

This management advice is not just for people who look after pastures and commons. In some areas, like Surrey, the best places to find wild chamomile plants are sports pitches. By mowing in a chamomile-friendly way, and limiting the use of artificial fertilisers and weed killers, you can make sure that footballers and cricketers enjoy the fragrance of chamomile when they take a tumble on your beautifully tended pitch!

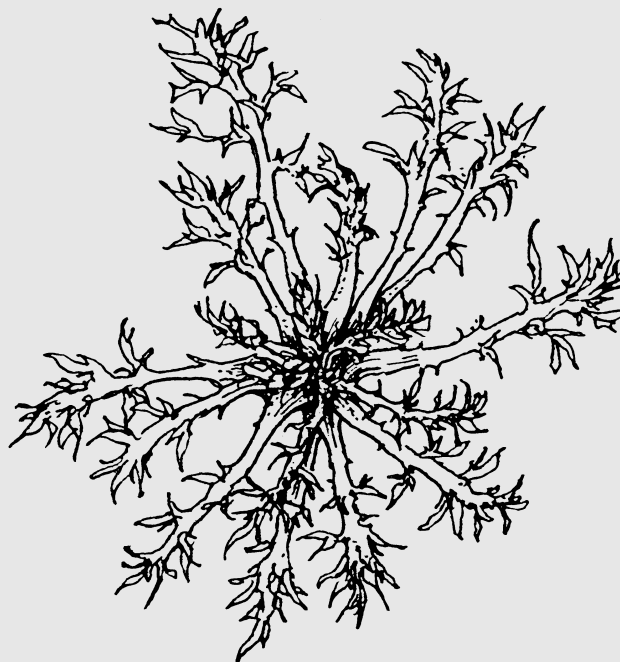


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“Like a chamomile bed - the more it is trodden, the more it will spread.” (traditional proverb)

Sports pitches

- If possible, limit mowing to once a week on areas which support chamomile.
- Remove the clippings if you can, to reduce the fertility of these areas; chamomile finds it hard to compete with other species on rich soils.
- Mow less frequently around September and October to allow chamomile to flower and set seed.
- Allow some damp patches to remain in your outfield; these are the places which chamomile likes best.
- Avoid the use of artificial fertilisers and herbicides in chamomile areas.



Grazed pastures and commons

- Chamomile can survive being grazed and trampled by large herbivores; it is adapted to life with grazing. Traditional grazed pastures are perfect chamomile habitat.
- Grazing by waterfowl and deer can work well too, if not too intensive.
- Sheep and rabbits are not so



- successful, because they create a very close cropped sward.
- Stocking levels can be reduced in September and October to allow flowering and seed-set.
- Avoid the use of artificial fertilisers and herbicides in chamomile areas.

Roadside and track verges and other marginal habitats

- Try to maintain a short sward by regular but not too frequent mowing (not more than once a week).
- Maintain some patches of bare ground; small-scale disturbance by animals, people or vehicles can do this job.
- Avoid the use of artificial fertilisers and herbicides in chamomile areas.
- Control overhanging vegetation, as chamomile cannot grow in shady conditions.
- If chamomile is growing in seasonally wet areas, do not be tempted to fill or drain them to improve access. Winter-wet areas are perfect for chamomile.
- Encourage walkers and horse-riders to get their feet muddy in these kinds of places - it's fun, and a little winter disturbance will help create the right conditions for chamomile in the following spring and summer!

See chamomile at Kew Gardens!

Chamomile flourishes in some of the informal lawns at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in west London. It has been recorded there for many years, although it is not known whether Kew's chamomile is wild, an escape from nearby flower beds, or a remnant of historical chamomile lawns. It thrives under the current regime, where lawns are mown every fortnight (to a minimum height of 2cm) and where there is extra grazing by Canada geese! During the summer large numbers of visitors compact the



ground, making it prone to winter water-logging, which chamomile also enjoys.

Several of the largest populations are not mown during August and September so that the plants can flower and set seed. Signs nearby enable visitors to appreciate Kew's chamomile, and learn a little about it.

Look out for chamomile on the lawns in front of Kew's historic Orangery, next to the Jodrell Laboratory or just across the pond from the magnificent Palm House.

Further advice and information on chamomile can be obtained from:



PLANTLIFE

21 Elizabeth Street, London SW1W 9RP

Tel: 020 7808 0100

email: enquiries@plantlife.org.uk

website: www.plantlife.org.uk

Plantlife is Britain's only national membership charity dedicated exclusively to conserving all forms of plant life in their natural habitats. It has 12,000 members, owns and manages 22 nature reserves, and runs a programme to promote recovery of threatened plants called *Back from the Brink*. Plantlife involves its members as volunteers (called *Flora Guardians*) in delivering many aspects of this work; at present over 200 people contribute towards *Back from the Brink* in this way.



ENGLISH
NATURE

Northminster House, Peterborough, PE1 1UA

Tel: 01733 455000

English Nature's Species Recovery Programme aims to achieve long-term self-sustained survival in the wild of the species of plants and animals currently under threat of extinction. The programme has supported work on ground pine through Plantlife's *Back from the Brink* project since 1993.