

# Verbascum thapsus

## Common mullein

*Verbascum thapsus* L.

Family: Scrophulariaceae

**Description:** Biennial herb to 6 ft tall. Yellowish, woolly. Leaves at base 10 inches by 3 inches, smaller in upper part of stem. Flowers in compact clusters, yellow, rarely white. Capsules oval, woolly, 0.25 inches long. Seeds brown, furrowed, very small, numerous. *Verbascum*, Latin name derived from *barbatus*, bearded, because of the hairy stamen<sup>(70)</sup>; *thapsus*, for the Grecian isle of *Thapsos* where mullein was once harvested. The Greeks used the woolly leaves as candle wicks, and the Romans used the flowering spikes, soaked with tallow, as torches. In the Middle Ages, mullein was used to keep away demons and was eventually outlawed by the Christian church for the pagan beliefs surrounding it. It was used to treat gout, stomach cramps, and tooth aches and was also used in veterinary medicine. The leaves were used as a shoe liner in winter and for protecting feet from chafing. Mullein was carried to North America by the Puritans as a medicine for rheumatism, diarrhea, warts, sore throat, and respiratory ailments. The medicinal uses of mullein persist to this day as a home remedy for asthma and earaches. It was also used for making glue and as a tobacco substitute<sup>(39)</sup>.

**Distribution:** Native to Eurasia. Widely dispersed globally and in all U.S. states. In Hawai'i, common in Pōhakuloa, spreading along the Saddle Road and Māmalahoa Highway toward Kona. One plant was observed at the County Refuse Transfer Station at Keauhou in 1999.

**Environmental impact:** Invading dry forests in Kona and Saddle area. Also established on Maui. Colonizes sites of low fertility and disturbed sites and pastures where it may be favored because cattle will not graze it.



**Management:** Very sensitive to metsulfuron at 0.1 oz/acre<sup>(8)</sup>. Young plants sensitive to 2,4-D and glyphosate<sup>(33)</sup>. HAVO staff controlled mullein with glyphosate at 1% of product in water in foliar application. Also pulling and digging out roots was effective but labor-intensive and soil-disturbing (Chris Zimmer, HAVO). Plants are best controlled during the rosette stage<sup>(61)</sup>. Goats browse on mullein.