

## Suffering with hay fever? It's not hay

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*Antonio DiTommaso, of Dryden, associate professor and weed ecologist at Cornell University, displays what a Ragweed plant looks like. Allergy sufferers' symptoms will be relieved when the first frost stops pollen production in the plants. / SIMON WHEELER/STAFF PHOTO*

### Coping tips

• **Tip 1:** Monitor ragweed pollen counts by visiting weather information websites, such as [www.weather.com](http://www.weather.com), or [www.nws.noaa.gov](http://www.nws.noaa.gov), and entering your zip code. • **Tip 2:** Limit contact with ragweed pollen by showering before bedtime, drying clothes indoors, avoiding putting fans in windows, washing your hands often, not wearing outdoor work clothes in the [house](#)

, limiting your time outdoors when ragweed counts are high. • **Tip 3:** Seek treatment from an allergist. Allergists can prescribe medications to relieve symptoms and order injection therapy for

persistent or severe cases. • **For more information:** Go to [www.aafa.org](http://www.aafa.org). Source: Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America

Growing up in Louisiana, Jacqueline Bubb never had any problems with allergies.

But soon after she relocated to the Southern Tier in 1999, Bubb started to suffer with itchy, watery eyes, nasal congestion and other symptoms.

Bubb put up with the discomfort for years, but after it got progressively worse, she finally sought out an allergist for help.

It wasn't until this year that she discovered the culprit — ragweed.

"I had been diagnosed with seasonal allergies five years ago. I noticed it was always mid-August to mid-October that my symptoms were really bad," said Bubb, 30, of Beaver Dams. "So I went this year, and they diagnosed me officially with ragweed allergies. It's not [fun](#)

"The thing that really bothers me the most was my eyes would be almost swollen shut, and I wear contacts," she said. "That was when I really said I've got to get tested. I can take Allegra for seasonal allergies, but I need more than that. I have had a runny nose and my face would be so itchy, but my eyes were the real kicker that bothered me. It was awful."

### Seasonal torture

Bubb has plenty of company this time of year.

Ragweed is a very common plant in the Northeast, and late summer to early fall is prime time for allergies.

That's because ragweed pollen is circulating in the highest concentrations right now, according to Antonio DiTommaso, associate professor and weed ecologist at Cornell [University](#)

Ragweed is an annual plant in the same family as sunflowers, and it completes its life cycle in one growing season, DiTommaso said.

That cycle — and the accompanying misery it causes allergy sufferers — doesn't end until the first frost, he said.

"We call

it a plastic species. This plant can adapt to many different environments and still produce the seed," DiTommaso said. "It's a major agronomic weed in field crops and vegetables and gardens. From a human health perspective, starting in late August or mid-August, it produces millions of pollen grains that are transported in the wind and so forth. Pollen is produced until we have a frost.

"Pollen, when it gets into folks who are susceptible, induces a typical response of wheezing and teary eyes and so forth," he said. "That's caused by stimulation of histamine as a defense mechanism."

People who suffer from ragweed allergies often refer to their malady as hay fever, but it isn't hay causing their symptoms, and it isn't goldenrod either, DiTommaso said.

A lot of people confuse ragweed with goldenrod because it's also a prominent plant that is flowering this time of year, but that's a misconception, he said.

And if you have ragweed allergies, it's pretty hard to avoid contact without living in a bubble or moving to a different region, DiTommaso added.

"The easiest way would be to ship to northern Canada. It's very difficult to avoid it in our region," he said. "It does occur in disturbed habitat — roadways, housing developments, agricultural fields. It's a pioneer species, a plant that as soon as soil has been disturbed, it's one of the first species to come into the habitat. Where you won't see much is in very stable environments, like in forests. But it is so common along the East Coast that it's difficult to avoid it."

## Seeking relief

If people can't run away from ragweed, they can at least lessen the allergy symptoms.

There are myriad over-the-counter remedies available, and for more stubborn or severe cases, treatment by an allergist is called for.

Ragweed allergies are among the most common complaints allergists deal with, according to Dr. Mariah Pieretti, an allergist with Asthma and Allergy Associates, which has offices in Elmira and Ithaca.

“We have a lot of people coming in with itchy, watery eyes, stuffy nose, runny nose, post nasal drip, a lot of congestion,” Pieretti said. “People who have asthma can have that flare as well. We treat it with medications and shots. It’s hard to avoid the pollen completely this time of year.”

If you are allergic to ragweed, there are some steps you can take on your own to reduce exposure, Pieretti said.

Shower before bedtime to wash off pollen, dry [clothes](#)

in a dryer rather than outside, and avoid putting fans in windows, among other things, she said.

If symptoms persist, medical intervention may be necessary.

“We treat it with medications and shots. Allergy therapy can work, too, and desensitization can help,” Pieretti said. “They do use that, especially when they have symptoms that are present over a year or if medications aren’t effective. If they come to our office, we do testing for multiple environmental allergies, and other weeds as well. In the Northeast, people aren’t sensitive to just one pollen. We check for perennial things, such as dust mites, molds and dogs.”

Desensitization involves stimulation of the immune [system](#)

with gradually increasing doses of the substances to which a person is allergic to modify or stop the allergic response, and can be effective in treating ragweed allergies, Pieretti said.

Bubb, who said she lives in a high exposure area, has considered injection therapy, but for now, she’s getting by with prescription medication.

“We talked about an allergist doing injections. My allergy is bad enough to get them done, but it’s a huge time [commitment](#)

, every week for six months, then every other week for six months, up to five years,” Bubb said. “I didn’t think I could commit to that with my job and family. We are going the medication route at this point. I only have to take those during allergy season, which is right now.

“If it gets any worse, even on medication, the last resort would be injection therapy,” she said. “(For now) I definitely have found comfort.”