

Ragwort – friend or foe?

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Town & Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997: provides powers for Local Authorities to serve notice on occupiers whose land is harming the amenity of the area.

Weeds Act 1959: Common Ragwort is one of five 'injurious' plants listed in the Weeds Act 1959. This act enables Scottish Ministers to serve a notice to land occupiers where Common Ragwort is growing, requiring them to take action to prevent it spreading.

Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 & Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004: ragwort control on designated nature conservation sites (e.g. "Sites of Special Scientific Interest") will probably require consent from SNH. On any land, it is an offence to uproot a wild plant without the landowner's permission.

Sources of information and advice

- www.defra.gov.uk
- www.sac.ac.uk
- www.bhs.org.uk
- www.butterfly-conservation.org
- www.plantlife.org.uk
- www.scotland.gov.uk

What does the law say about ragwort?

Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006: this act, designed to prevent unnecessary suffering in animals, gives owners and keepers responsibility for the welfare of animals in their care. This includes an obligation to ensure all animals are kept in a suitable environment. It also gives Scottish Ministers the power to issue guidance to secure the welfare of protected animals. In 2008, "Scottish Government Guidance on How to prevent the Spread of Ragwort" was drawn up.



FLASHORSE

Ragwort kills horses.
Keep your horse away from ragwort

*Ragwort thou humble flower with tattered leaves
I love to see thee come & litter gold...
Thy waste of shining blossoms richly shields
The sun tanned sward in splendid hues that burn
So bright & glaring that the very light
Of the rich sunshine doth to paleness turn
& seems but very shadows in thy sight.*
John Clare, 1831

In summary, we recommend:

- a balanced, sensitive approach to ragwort control, giving full regard to animal welfare, the legal requirement to prevent spread, and to wildlife conservation;
- control through good land management practices, with hand-pulling or spot herbicide treatment if necessary;
- horse owners only buy hay or haylage from those who give a guarantee that it does not contain ragwort; and that
- where land is not grazed or used for forage production, ragwort is part of a diverse plant community, has biodiversity benefits and does not require control.

British Horse Society Scotland,
Woodburn, Crieff, Perthshire PH7 3RG
www.bhsscotland.org.uk

Plantlife Scotland,
Balallan House, Allan Park, Stirling, FK8 2QG
www.plantlife.org.uk

Butterfly Conservation Scotland,
Balallan House, Allan Park, Stirling, FK8 2QG
www.butterfly-conservation.org



BUTTERFLY CONSERVATION

Ragwort with flies



Meadow infestation



RAGWORT friend or foe?





Common Ragwort

Why is Ragwort an animal welfare problem?

Ragwort has evolved to be toxic to grazing animals as a form of defence, the toxins being pyrrolizidine alkaloids or “PAs”, which principally damage the liver.

Most grazing animals are susceptible to ragwort poisoning. Sheep and cattle are not discriminatory in their eating habits and can consume ragwort, although they generally avoid the living plants. Ragwort’s toxic effects on these animals are far less significant than for horses, when the effect of ragwort consumption is irreversible liver damage (cirrhosis).

Ragwort can be fatal to horses and is thought to be the most common cause of toxicity-induced death. Although horses will not normally eat ragwort, it becomes undetectable when incorporated into preserved forage such as hay or haylage. Where ragwort grows on horse pastures, some is inevitably consumed while grazing. Horses may also resort to the consumption of ragwort when there is shortage of food, or when the plant is particularly dense.

Signs that a horse has been poisoned by ragwort are distressing and include haemorrhage, weight loss, loss of co-ordination, depression, seizures and coma. A horse suffering from ragwort poisoning will be very sick and may be blind and disorientated.



Horse with signs of ragwort poisoning

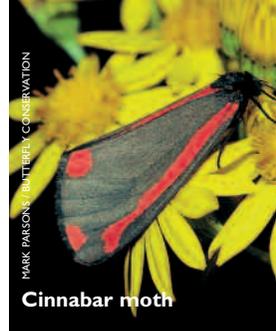
Is ragwort increasing?

A detailed study of vegetation change published in 2006 shows that the distribution of ragwort has not significantly changed over the last 20 years.

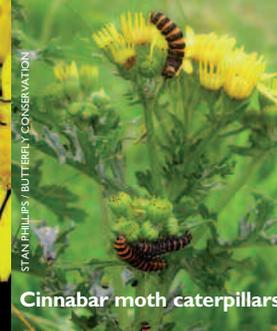
While there is no evidence that ragwort is becoming more widespread in the UK, there is, however, a perception that ragwort has become more locally abundant, with its noticeable yellow flowers and profusion on some brownfield sites and verges. Changes in land management could be leading to increased local abundance. Ragwort is not a problem where it grows as part of a diverse plant community, but it can become an issue when it becomes dominant and seeds into nearby pastures.

What are the biodiversity benefits of ragwort?

Many insects, such as leaf beetles and micro-moths, depend either on ragwort as a larval foodplant or as a nectar source. The most well-known is the Cinnabar moth. Its caterpillars will strip leaves and flower buds off ragwort plants completely, but after the caterpillars pupate, the plants usually recover and grow new leaves. Moreover, within Scotland, the moth is confined to the south and coastal areas.



Cinnabar moth



Cinnabar moth caterpillars



Closed sward

Why can ragwort control be a problem for wildlife?

Ragwort should not be allowed to proliferate on pastures that are used by grazing animals or grass crops being grown for forage. However, non-target species can be affected by eradication efforts, especially where spraying with herbicide is used.

In addition, Common Ragwort can be confused with other yellow daisy-like native species. These include St. John’s Wort, Common Fleabane, Goldenrod and Tansy, which could be mistaken for ragwort by the non-botanist and damaged or destroyed accidentally as part of a ragwort control programme. There have been cases where very rare plants have been inadvertently pulled up in efforts to control ragwort.

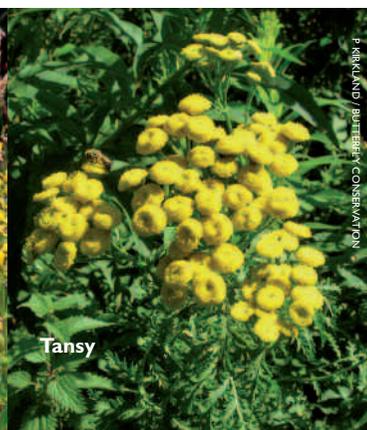
Apart from Common Ragwort, three other species of ragwort are native to Scotland, including the widespread Marsh Ragwort. These species can also be toxic, but are rarely a cause of poisoning to livestock, and do not grow in large quantities on grazing land.



Goldenrod



St John's Wort



Tansy

How should ragwort be controlled and managed?

There are three main ways to control ragwort:

1. Good pasture management

Careful management of grassland to maintain a closed sward structure in pastures is a vital part of a prevention and control strategy. In poorly-managed grasslands Common Ragwort can flourish. The long-term solution therefore is to maintain appropriate grazing management.

Hay producers have a responsibility towards livestock health and are legally obliged under trading standards to guarantee that any hay sold is not contaminated with ragwort.

2. Using herbicides

Individual ragwort plants can be killed by dabbing herbicide onto rosettes. Herbicide must be very carefully applied to individual plants so that non-target plants nearby are not affected. This is why spraying whole areas, as opposed to treating individual ragwort plants, is not recommended.

3. Manual control

Plants can be pulled out by hand, although precautions should be taken to prevent ragwort plants coming into contact with the skin. Rosettes can be dug out in the early spring. This is labour-intensive work, but very effective on a small scale.



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Pulling ragwort with a rag fork

Rag forks and weed pulling tools are available from www.rag-fork.co.uk or www.lazydogtoolco.co.uk. Always wear gloves and protective clothing when pulling ragwort.

Disposal of dead ragwort

Any ragwort management should include removal of all dead and dying material if there is any possibility of grazing animals using the site. This material must be disposed of carefully and **should not be composted.**



Hay contaminated with ragwort

What is Ragwort?

Common Ragwort *Senecio jacobaea* is a native plant with yellow, daisy-like flowers. It is a natural component of many types of grassland, and, as part of our natural heritage, supports many species of wildlife, including fungi and insects, which depend on it for their survival. However, ragwort is toxic to grazing animals. Ragwort spreads by seed, which are carried by the wind. Although most seed travels no more than 5m from the parent plants, a single plant may produce up to 30,000 seeds, which can readily germinate on bare ground or disturbed soil.

The plant has an unpleasant smell and is also known as ‘Stinking Willy’. After the Battle of Culloden in 1746, the victorious English are said to have renamed the attractive garden flower Sweet William, in honour of William, Duke of Cumberland. The defeated Scots retaliated by naming ragwort, Stinking Willy!