

Common ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*)

This plant is found throughout much of Europe, Asia and North Africa and has been introduced into North America and Australia. Everywhere it is regarded as a noxious weed. It is a medium-tall and little-branched biennial found in dry, grassy places. Its leaves are pinnately lobed with pairs of leaflets arising from a central midrib with a terminal lobe which is small and blunt. Flowers are 15-25 mm across in yellow, dense, flat topped clusters. On wetter soils, it is replaced by **marsh ragwort** (*Senecio aquaticus*) which is more widely branched with the terminal lobe larger but still blunt. The flowerheads are larger (25-30 mm) in looser clusters. A local speciality is **Oxford ragwort** (*Senecio squalidus*) which has spread from the Oxford Botanical Gardens having been introduced there from southern Italy. Its mode of movement was originally along the railway lines with the seeds being dispersed linearly by air movements created by the trains and also carried within the train carriages. It is well branched but less tall with the end lobe sharply pointed. A very common relative is **groundsel** (*Senecio vulgaris*) which is an annual weed of cultivation with brush-like flowers in loose clusters. The larger **sticky groundsel** (*Senecio viscosus*) is taller, foetid (strongly smelling) with sticky hairs and larger paler flowerheads. The genus *Senecio* was so called because the seeding flower heads were thought to resemble the grey heads of old men and *jacobaea* is perhaps best translated as 'despised'.

Common ragwort is extremely poisonous to cattle, sheep, horses and pigs due to the presence of pyrrolizidine alkaloids which affect the liver leading to cirrhosis from which there is no recovery. Animals will not normally eat it in the green state unless there is little other vegetation on offer which may happen in paddocks where stock are kept for exercise and fresh air rather than for grazing. Sheep have been used to eat the rosettes in early spring when there is little grass herbage but this can be dangerous to them. Hence, the majority of cases arise from ingestion of the palatable dried or wilted material, for example in hay or silage. When the plant is dying after the use of a herbicide, again it is readily consumed. The other ragworts are not documented but it would be best to assume that they, too, are also poisonous.

The 'rag' part of the name is said to be derived from the ragged leaves and 'wort' indicates a medicinal plant. Whilst no longer taken internally for gynaecological problems, the aerial parts of ragwort still find use as a poultice, ointment or lotion applied to relieve pain and inflammation including rheumatism and sciatica- but only under professional supervision.

In the absence of any control, ragwort will seed prolifically producing tiny seeds each suspended from its feathery pappus which acts as a parachute allowing it to drift for miles on the late summer breezes until it comes to rest. The young plant forms a rosette in the autumn and a stem the following spring to be in full flower on St James's day which is July 25th- from which is derived the former name of St James's Wort.

Because of its poisonous properties and ability to spread far and wide, common ragwort is classed as an injurious weed specified in the Weeds Act of 1959 together with spear thistle, common or creeping thistle, curled dock and broad-leaved dock. It is not illegal to have the five specified plants growing on land. The act is primarily concerned with the control of injurious weeds and preventing the seeds spreading to adjacent land.

Anybody concerned about the spread of harmful weeds should attempt to identify the owner or occupier of the land on which the weeds are growing and ask that person to take steps to stop the weeds spreading. If this fails to secure any improvement and if the weed concerned is one of the five covered by the Weeds Act, matters should be taken up with the competent authority. For railway land, this is Railtrack (or its successor). For motorways and trunk roads verges, it is the Highways Agency. All other roads are the responsibility of the local Highways Authority. For private roads, it is the owner. If the weeds are growing on any other land and they are threatening farmland and farming activities, or spreading onto farmland that is being used for the keeping of horses as part of a diversified business, the contact is the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). However, they will not investigate the spread of weeds to other land used for grazing horses or ponies nor to allotments and gardens.

The only natural 'enemy' of ragwort is the Cinnabar moth (*Tyria jacobaeae*) found in most of Britain. The larvae are seen in late summer and have alternate bands of black and orange signifying their distasteful properties to potential predators. They pupate just underground and the adults fly in May and June. They have a wing span of 35-48 mm and are very colourful. The fore wings are greyish-black with a crimson stripe along the leading edge ending in a spot with two further spots of the same colour near the outer corners. The hind wings are completely crimson except for a narrow fringe of greyish-black. There are variations in colour with some being completely smoky-grey and some others with yellow instead of red. Their predations seem to have little effect on the ragwort population.

Therefore, the only way to control ragwort is by human intervention. Where herbicides are preferred and possible, formulations of 2,4-D as the active ingredient can be **sprayed** in autumn and/or spring on the rosette before any appreciable stem formation. Stock have to be removed for some time and most other broadleaved plants will be checked or killed. Citronella oil is a possible spot treatment. When a stem is formed in early summer, it may be possible to use the **weedwiping technique** to apply a total herbicide to individual plants without touching other susceptible species but again stock must not have access. **Cutting is not recommended.** The basal part of the cut plant throws out new shoots so becomes perennialised, the cut portion becomes a hazard and seed may still be set. This leaves **pulling (or digging out)** as the best option when the plant is at or approaching flowering stage but before any seed formation. Gloves should be worn to avoid any danger from sap penetration of skin. Removal and burning within The Code of Practice for the Protection of Air is the preferred method of disposal.

However assiduous an occupier of land is in controlling ragwort, there is always a threat from windborne seed from elsewhere. Therefore, there is a moral duty on all owners and occupiers to prevent seed dispersal and bring this potential killer of livestock under control.

References:

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Colin Dobb
Tilehurst
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