

Ragwort

The Facts

Common Ragwort (*Senecio jacobea*) is an unpleasant poisonous plant. Many people do not realise how dangerous it is and the damage it can cause. Ragwort contains the toxic compounds pyrrolizidine alkaloids. Horses are particularly susceptible to ragwort poisoning although other grazing animals are also at risk. Pyrrolizidine alkaloids principally damage the liver, resulting in severe disease and in many cases death.

The Life Of Ragwort

Ragwort is normally a biennial plant taking two years to fully grow and flower. Seedlings have a spade shaped leaf that is notched at the top. In the first year of growth ragwort has a dense rosette of leaves low to the ground, but does not flower. Plants in their second year grow to between 30 and 100cm high and have woody stems and dark green leaves with ragged, irregular edges. They produce bright yellow, densely packed flowers from May to October. Ragwort can behave like a perennial (flowering every year) if the long stems are cut or mown. A single plant can produce 150 000 seeds with a 70% germination success rate. Each seed can lie dormant and viable in the ground for 20 years. Any bit of root left when it is dug up will re-grow. 2lb of fresh ragwort will kill a horse. This is cumulative and will cause progressive and irreversible liver damage. By the time symptoms show, there is no cure, and the animal dies or has to be humanely destroyed. Symptoms may include weight loss, poor and staring coat, staggering gait, impaired vision followed by circling, blindness, colliding with obstacles, salivation, lachrymation, severe abdominal pain, inability to swallow and finally complete paralysis, collapse and death. Chronic intoxication is indicated by the loss of the long hair from the mane and tail of horses or the switch of cattle, dullness and lack of vitality, emaciation coupled with a depraved appetite and abnormalities or sloughing of the hooves.



Ragwort thrives on wasteland, road verges and railway land and from these locations it can spread to pasture. Poor quality and poorly managed horse pastures are particularly susceptible to ragwort infestations. Closely growing grass sward prevents ragwort growth but when the grass becomes thinned out, due to poaching or over grazing, the seeds are able to germinate in the exposed soil. Most animals will avoid eating ragwort as long as they have an alternative source of good food. This can therefore be a problem on sparse, overgrazed pastures which ragwort can thrive on. There are anecdotal reports that some horses can develop an acquired taste for the plant, especially if there is little else to eat. When cut or wilted (during hay or haylage making) ragwort loses its bitter taste and becomes more palatable to horses. Drying or dying does not destroy the toxins and dried grass, hay and haylage are common sources of ragwort poisoning



Ragwort and the Law

Ragwort is an injurious weed and the control of Ragwort comes under two government acts the Weeds Act 1959 (for the whole of the UK) and the Ragwort Act 2003 (England and Wales only). Under these laws governmental authorities can serve clearance notices to prevent the weed from spreading. If appropriate, in the first instance, approach the owner/occupier of the land on which ragwort is growing and request them to take steps to clear the weed. It is now a legal requirement for an owner to control Ragwort on their land, whether grazed or not.

In England and Wales the Department of Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs (Defra) is responsible for enforcing the Weeds Act 1959 and Ragwort Act 2003. If the problem of ragwort growing on adjacent land cannot be resolved then a Weed Act complaint form can be completed. These forms, and further information, can be obtained from either:

Website: <http://www.defra.gov.uk/rural/horses/topics/ragwort.htm>.

Or from the following rural development services (depending on the region)

Bristol - South West Rural Development Service
Block 3
Government Buildings
Burghill Road
Westbury-on-Trym
Bristol BS10 6NJ

Tel: 0117 959 8622

There are various methods of control:

Spraying

The most effective and economical treatment is by spraying a herbicide containing 2-4D from late April, or when the soil has warmed up and the plant is actively growing until early June. This season we are using the herbicide Thrust. Ragwort becomes more resistant to herbicide the later it is left in the season and once it has started to flower it is almost impermeable to herbicides. Spraying is relatively cheap costing around £55 an acre, less for areas over 10 acres. This is far cheaper than the death of a horse. The herbicide will also control many other pasture weeds such as creeping buttercup at the same time. Animals will need to be excluded for at least 14 days following spraying. Applied correctly it will not damage grass. It is best to carry out an overall spray to ensure all Ragwort plants are treated. As it is a biennial one spray should control both the current years plants and the plants in their rosette stage which would flower the subsequent year. It will not have any residual effect and plants will continue to germinate from the remaining seeds. Ragwort is a tough and resistant plant and even after spraying some plants may still survive. As seeds can remain viable for 30 years repeat sprays in subsequent years may be required until the seed bank is exhausted. We are often asked to apply the pesticide at a 'strong' rate. The permitted maximum application rate of herbicide is specified in law and cannot be exceeded, this would be both breaking the law and could kill off the grass as well.

Another herbicide, Barrier H, is a natural plant extract containing Citronella Oil and is available in handy back packs for treating individual Ragwort plants. It is very expensive and not suitable for treating large areas. Care must be taken with application as it will often cause the death of surrounding grass. Like 2,4-D it is more effective the earlier in the season it can be applied.

Digging Out or Pulling

This is a very labour-intensive method. The entire plant must be removed, roots and all as any piece of root left in the ground will regrow. The pulled plants must be removed from site and burned or disposed-off well away from where any animals may subsequently graze. If done too late then the seeds may well disperse on pulling or the plant will have enough moisture left in it to allow the seeds to ripen and then spread on the wind even if they have been pulled. Rubber gloves must be worn during pulling as the toxins can affect humans in the same way as horses and the poison can be absorbed through the skin.

Cutting

Although cutting will stop the plant flowering, it will not kill it and may even turn the plant into an annual. Even with collection equipment cut pieces will still be left on the ground and can subsequently still be eaten so cutting is not recommended as a treatment.