

Common Ragwort (Senecio jacobaea)



Description, risk and handling

It is a tall erect biennial growing up to 90cm/3ft in height and bearing large flat-topped clusters of yellow daisy-like flowers from July to October. Has finely divided leaves and a basal rosette of deeply cut, toothed leaves.

Like many wildflowers, it is poisonous to humans, but the only potential risk would be if it were eaten in fairly large quantities. It may cause skin irritation to those allergic to members of the daisy family and an easy safeguard is to wear gloves when handling it.

As it is very bitter-tasting when growing, livestock will rarely eat it then, except through extreme hunger, when little other food is available. However, if it is mown and contaminates hay or other feed, it is dangerous as it loses its bitterness when dry but retains its toxins. These will damage an animal's liver and may ultimately prove fatal, especially to horses and cattle.

Sheep are sometimes used to nibble off young plants where concentration of the ragwort is low.

Non-chemical control

Common Ragwort can become a major weed on waste or other uncultivated ground like paddocks and thrives on light and low-fertile soils.

It is difficult to eradicate manually. Pulling ragwort is practical where weed numbers are low, but the benefit is only temporary. The rosette has an often deep taproot, and a beheaded taproot may die, but if a fragment of fine side-root remains this invariably results in regeneration. Cutting at the early flower stage reduces seed production but can stimulate the growth of side shoots, resulting in more vigorous growth in the following year.

Though usually a biennial, ragwort may behave like a perennial if the base is damaged, as new rosettes are formed. Cut plants are a serious risk to grazing animals and may still set seed. They should be removed and burnt.

The legal position

There is no general duty on anybody to control ragwort. The Weeds Act 1959 merely gives the Secretary of State power to serve a notice requiring a landowner to control ragwort.

Principal source used: The Royal Horticultural Society