

## RAGWORT FACT SHEET

### Ragwort & Biodiversity

- Nineteen species of the ragwort genus, *Senecio*, occur in the wild in Britain, but most of these are garden escapes or other introductions.
- The main 'weed' species is the native common ragwort (*Senecio jacobea*) which thrives where bare ground or thin vegetation allows the development of seedlings.
- There is no evidence that ragwort is increasing in abundance or distribution. The 2007 UK Countryside Survey shows a significant decline.
- There are other widespread ragwort species that look similar to common ragwort, as well as some rare native species. Most of the widespread native species of *Senecio* are groundsels and there are numerous other plants which can be mistaken for common ragwort.
- At least 30 insect species and 14 fungi species are entirely reliant on ragwort, and about a third of these insects are scarce or rare. The majority are confined to common ragwort or the closely similar hoary ragwort (*Senecio erucifolius*). Of the 52 species which are highly reliant on ragwort, seven are Nationally Scarce, and three are of Red Data Book status. Most breed in the flowers, seedheads or stems and control by uprooting or flailing can destroy the habitats of these insects.
- Ragwort is an important nectar source for hundreds of species of butterflies, bees, moths, flies and other invertebrates, helping to support populations in the UK countryside.

### Ragwort & the Law

- Common ragwort is one of five species listed under the Weeds Act 1959 as being an injurious plant.
- The 1959 Act has been amended by the Ragwort Control Act 2003. The Act provides for Government to produce a guide to ragwort control. It places no obligation on landowners to control ragwort. Defra have published a [Code of Practice on how to prevent the spread of ragwort](#).
- The Code states that "*common ragwort and other ragwort species are native to the British Isles and are therefore an inherent part of our flora and fauna, along with invertebrate and other wildlife they support. The Code does not propose the eradication of common ragwort but promotes a strategic approach to control the spread of common ragwort where it poses a threat to the health and welfare of grazing animals and the production of feed or forage.*"
- The Code of Practice provides guidelines on assessing the risk posed to grazing animals or forage production to determine whether action should be taken to prevent the spread of ragwort to neighbouring land. The guidelines state that an area could be at high risk if "*ragwort is present and flowering/seeding within 50m of land used for grazing by horses and other animals or land used for feed/forage production*".
- The Code also states "*the distances... are guidelines only and when assessing risk, account should be taken of particular local circumstances and other relevant factors such as prevailing winds, topography, shelter belts, natural barriers, soil type and vegetation cover of receiving land*".
- The 1959 Act gives the Government (through Natural England) power to order a landowner to prevent certain weeds from spreading. Without such an order, there is no legal obligation on a landowner to do anything. Whilst Natural England can issue an order to control ragwort if it is perceived to be a threat, they will only do this as a last resort.
- Natural England states that it is not an offence to have these weeds growing on your land and that species such as ragwort have significant conservation benefits.

### Ragwort & Health

- Common ragwort (and all other ragworts and groundsels, and about 3% of all flowering plants), contain compounds that are poisonous to most invertebrates and insects. These secondary metabolites are called pyrrolizidine alkaloids (PAs) and they can cause liver damage.
- It is a cumulative poison that can eventually lead to the rapid onset of symptoms before death. However, the symptoms of PA poisoning are variable and non-specific and can have many causes including birth defects, bacterial and viral infections and parasites, or they can be caused by toxins other than PAs. Diagnosis can only be confirmed by dissection of the liver.

- Only if an animal eats relatively large amounts of PA containing plants will it show symptoms. Exact amounts are unknown but estimates are around 7% of body weight for horses. Cattle are also prone, and sheep less so, but there is little evidence of any lethal effects on livestock other than horses.
- Incidental ingestion of small amounts of ragwort will not cause illness. The toxins are excreted within 24-48 hours. If an animal consumes several kilograms of ragwort a day or small amounts for extended periods, this may lead to liver damage.
- Ragwort poisoning can take place when animals eat fresh or dried plants. Because fresh plants have a repellent smell and taste, these are usually avoided. However, they do not recognise dried ragwort as poisonous and contaminated hay may cause ragwort poisoning.
- There is no substantial evidence that there is a health risk to humans from touching ragwort. The amount of PAs that might be absorbed through the skin is very low and there is no proof that these alkaloids are being changed into the toxic form that can cause liver damage.
- Ragwort making contact with the skin may cause an allergic reaction called Compositae Dermatitis. This is caused by sesquiterpene lactones which are commonly produced by plants of the daisy family.

### **Ragwort Spread & Control**

- Ragwort seeds are capable of dispersal over great distances but this only happens under rare and unusual circumstances. The overwhelming majority of seeds fall within 5 metres of a plant. Even if a seed is dispersed to a new area, there is still only a small chance that it will grow into an adult plant. Consequently, ragwort growing on roadside verges where it is of great ecological value to biodiversity does not usually need to be controlled.
- Ragwort is difficult to eradicate and most methods to remove the plants, including hand pulling, mowing and the use of herbicides may actually increase the number of plants at a given site.

### **Further information**

Defra guidance. [\*Prevent harmful weeds and invasive non-native plants spreading.\*](#)

Defra. 2004. [\*Code of Practice on How to Prevent the Spread of Ragwort.\*](#)

[The Weeds Act 1959.](#)

[Ragwort Control Act 2003.](#)

Buglife. [Ragwort:weed or wildflower?](#)

[Ragwort myths and facts.](#)

Ragwort Facts. [Information on Ragwort in the UK from a scientific perspective.](#)