

Common ragwort – an unfairly persecuted plant?

One wild plant that nearly everyone seems to know is ragwort, and nearly everyone seems to believe that it kills horses. This view has meant that ragwort has become a persecuted plant in the UK to the detriment of the wildlife that it supports.

Common ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*) is part of our native flora. It supports a wide variety of insects, many nationally rare or scarce, including 30 which are entirely reliant on ragwort. It is an extremely important source of nectar and pollen for many species including butterflies and bees.

The best-known specialist feeder on ragwort is the cinnabar moth, an attractive day-flying black and red moth with distinctive black-and-yellow striped caterpillars. Unfortunately, the removal of ragwort plants is leading to a decline in this moth and other ragwort specialists because people are worried about the possible harm the plant might cause. Worries that are fuelled by popular media and otherwise responsible organisations despite the facts. So, what is the truth about ragwort?



The distinctive cinnabar moth caterpillar on ragwort flowers



Adult cinnabar moth – a ragwort specialist

Along with many other plants, ragwort does contain pyrrolizidine alkaloids. These substances are bitter tasting and provide protection to the plant from grazing animals such as horses and cattle. Indeed, in overgrazed pastures, ragwort plants can reach very high numbers. If the plant is eaten, the alkaloids are broken down by the intestines and liver and the breakdown products in the liver are toxic and can damage liver cells. Importantly, the breakdown products are excreted by the animal so the toxins do not accumulate in the body. Research has shown that a lethal dose of ragwort is between 5% and 25% of the body weight for horses and cattle. That is quite a lot! A 400kg horse would need to eat more than 20kg of ragwort.

So, ragwort is poisonous and could make an animal ill if large quantities are consumed, for example, by bundling the ragwort in with hay. But the likelihood of fatal poisoning is low, particularly as animals avoid eating the living plant. In wild places and areas that are not subject to grazing the plant is essentially harmless. Where low levels of ragwort are present

in grassland being managed for hay, it is a sensible precaution to remove the ragwort plants so that they don't get into the hay in large amounts.

Ragwort is spread by wind-blown seeds that colonise bare and disturbed soil. However, seed dispersal is very local to the parent plant, rarely spreading more than 40 metres, and ragwort is highly unlikely to get established in neighbouring lawns and well-managed grassland. Left to set seed, the plant will die naturally. However, attempts to control ragwort by pulling or cutting it before it naturally sets seed are counterproductive as pieces of living plant remain that will regrow more densely than before.

To summarise, in almost all situations where it is found, common ragwort is highly unlikely to cause a health problem to people or their animals. So, while it is sensible to keep the plant away from livestock, please leave it alone elsewhere as it is an important plant for wildlife and has a valuable place in our countryside and wild places.

To find out more see <https://www.ragwortfacts.com/index.html>