

Common ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*) is part of our native flora. It supports a wide variety of insects, many nationally rare or scarce, including 30* (see reference below) which are entirely reliant on ragwort. It is an extremely important source of nectar and pollen for many species including butterflies and bees. It's also an essential foodplant for the cinnabar moth caterpillar.

Ragwort is a biennial or short-lived perennial that readily seeds into bare or disturbed ground, and is particularly successful on light, sandy soils. Some land-management practices favour this opportunist species (such as ground disturbance and over or under-grazing).

Identifying ragwort

The young plant appears as a rosette of basal leaves. The leaves are deep green in colour, deeply cut and toothed giving the ragged appearance from which the plant derives its name. In the next summer, flowering stems, about 30–100cm high, are produced. These bear flat-topped clusters of characteristic bright yellow daisy-like flowers. The flowers mature into white seed heads containing large numbers of downy seeds. The wind dispersed seeds ripen from August onwards. They may remain dormant in the soil for 15+ years. This ability to lie dormant can cause sudden flushes of ragwort to appear should the land use be changed. This can be quite temporary (for example in a newly-planted woodland, or when a field is reverting from arable agriculture). It will soon return to balance after a few years when other plants start to become more dominant.



Although common ragwort is the most widespread ragwort species, others are found in Suffolk: marsh ragwort (*Senecio aquaticus*), Oxford ragwort (*Senecio squalidus*), narrowedleafed ragwort (*Senecio inaequidens*), silver-leafed ragwort (*Senecio ambiguus*) and hoary ragwort (*Senecio erucifolius*). Hoary ragwort is most often found on the clay-lands of Suffolk. As these species are not as common, or considered invasive, these species are not covered under the Injurious Weeds Act.

Ragwort management

There is sometimes a conflict between the need to manage ragwort and its value to wildlife. It's important to take a balanced view as to whether there is a need to control ragwort and decide on any action case-by-case.

Ragwort poses the greatest risk to livestock when cut and dried, either in hay, or as arisings from topping. The use of chemical sprays can also make it more palatable in its living form. Where ragwort is considered to present a risk to livestock, e.g. within a grazing area or hay field or the seeds are likely to blow directly in from an adjacent field, some management might be needed.

Common control methods

If managing or developing land for wildlife, especially wilding, ragwort often colonises, especially on free draining soils. However, the longer term shift to scrub grass mosaic will gradually both shade and out-compete ragwort - so natural processes may do the job for you.

1. Good grassland management

One of the best ways to manage ragwort is to prevent it taking hold on land where it may be a problem for livestock or land management. Ragwort is usually more common on overgrazed and under-grazed land, as both of these can create bare ground and colonisation opportunities. Ensuring livestock numbers are appropriate and careful timing of grazing can help prevent ragwort becoming problematic.

2. Pulling and digging

If control is necessary, then for small amounts of ragwort, pulling is the most effective and least invasive method. When removing plants in this way it is necessary to ensure that all traces of root have been removed, as small fragments can develop into new plants. The plants should be removed before they have completed flowering. It is always advisable to wear gloves when dealing with ragwort. All pulled or dug ragwort material needs to be removed to a location that's not accessible to grazing animals and won't be a source of re-seeding.

3. Cutting

Cutting should only be used to prevent immediate seeding where no other control method can be employed or is desirable. Cutting will have no long-term impact on the ragwort population. If cut, the plants can re-flower later in the season or change from biennial to a perennial. As cut and dried ragwort is toxic if ingested, livestock should not be grazed until all traces of cut material has degraded or has been removed.

4. Herbicide

The use of herbicide is generally not recommended as herbicides are detrimental for wildlife and the environment. However, targeted spot-treatment or weed-wiping of ragwort may sometimes be appropriate as a last resort.

Further information

Buglife:	https://www.buglife.org.uk/resources/policy-and-legislation-hub/ragwort/
Legislation:	https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Eliz2/7-8/54/introduction
	https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/40/introduction
DEFRA:	www.defra.gov.uk
More info:	http://ragwort.org.uk/



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