

Common Ragwort



Common ragwort has long been lambasted as a weed of pastures and paddocks, feared for its toxicity and seldom tolerated in our countryside. Indeed, it's unlawful to allow ragwort to spread on land less than 100m from where horses or livestock graze. But is this a reasonable approach, or does ragwort need a rebrand?

Our rebuttal of ragwort is based on the plant's poisonous nature, but perhaps this has been overstated. Ragwort contains chemicals called pyrrolizidine alkaloids (PAs) which, in the plant, are non-toxic. It's only when consumed that they take on a new form which can damage the liver and other organs. These chemicals likely evolved as a herbivore deterrent, and are just one of many strategies employed by plants across the world to avoid being eaten.

Combined with an off-putting smell and taste, this strategy works well. The familiar sight of ragwort plants standing tall among grazed pasture is due to the fact that animals generally avoid it.

The risk to livestock usually arises only when ragwort is cut and dried in hay, when its odour and flavour have faded, and animals may eat it without noticing.

Once ingested, the risk to the animal depends, as you might expect, on how much they've eaten. A small bite of ragwort won't do any lasting damage, and the toxic chemicals are usually excreted within 48 hours. It's only when eating a large amount of ragwort, or over an extended period of time, that more serious impacts can occur. Thankfully, this is rare, and removing the plant where it might be an issue is the best course of action. Elsewhere however, that isn't necessary.

A native plant to the UK, it's enjoyed many names through human history, including staggerwort, dog standard and stinking willy. But it's connection to our landscape is much older. Like many native plants, ragwort enjoys a rich relationship with our wildlife. It's clusters of bright yellow flowers are some of the most frequently visited by butterflies, and more than 200 invertebrate species have been recorded on the plant.

Perhaps the most well-known, and certainly the most striking, of ragwort's residents is the cinnabar moth. It's tiger-striped caterpillars cover the plant throughout the summer months, gorging on the greenery until they pupate and emerge as one of our most handsome moths. The contrasting colours in both larvae and adult warn potential predators that they, like the ragwort they rely on, are distasteful and shouldn't be eaten, having taken on toxins from feeding on the ragwort.

So is our war with this infamous wort justified? Or should we be tolerating, even it for the diversity of life it supports? That certainly seems to be the way things are moving as we allow a little bit more wild into our lives. Attitudes are changing as plants once called weeds – just a plant in the 'wrong' place – are recognised as key components of our native natural world.

That's why, in the urban areas of north Somerset where parks and public spaces are growing wilder, the council won't be ripping up ragwort anymore. When you see those towers of yellow flowers erupting from the grass, don't panic, but pause.

Take a closer look, and enjoy all the life this plant supports.

